Sunsunsun
Illustrated by
Momoco
8
И тебе спасибо!
Alya
Sometimes Hides Her
Feelings in
Russian
Fan TL

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"Oh, I've been waiting for you, Kuze-ku~n!
Trick or treat!"

"Ahh~! Saa-kun's here~."

“Uuu.. ”

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Fan Translator's Note

Prologue - Secret

In the middle of October, on a certain night, Ayano suddenly awoke, feeling restless.

Ah, it's hot…

Upon waking, she immediately sensed her entire body being enveloped in a humid warmth. Annoyed, she pushed aside the duvet on top of her. Recently, she had finally started to feel the chill of autumn nights and stopped using a thin blanket, but tonight felt uncomfortably humid.

Already autumn, huh…

Ayano, trying to go back to sleep with a turn, soon realized within a timespan of just ten seconds that she wasn't able to. She decided to get up.

Bathroom…

Careful not to make any noise to avoid waking up others in the house, Ayano left her room with extra caution. Walking through the dim corridor, she finished using the toilet and was about to return to her room when a faint sound caught her ears.

"!"

Could it be that she had woken someone up…? The possibility flashed through Ayano's mind, instantly dispelling the drowsiness that lingered in her core. If the source of the sound was someone like her grandparents or the household staff, it would be fine. But if, by chance, the one awakened was someone from the Suou family that Ayano served… she would have no choice but to prostrate herself.

Shivering at the dreadful anticipation, Ayano, while wishing desperately that she had misheard, headed towards the direction of

where she heard the sound. Climbing the stairs, walking down the

corridor, turning a corner… and there, in her field of vision, Ayano felt the urge to look up to the heavens when a figure came into view.

A woman with long black hair in braids, wearing a negligee.

Undoubtedly, it was Yuki Suou's mother, Yumi Suou, whom Ayano served.

"I must prostrate myself…"

Thinking hastily, she began the preliminary movements for a sliding prostration… but stopped abruptly. If Yumi, like Ayano, had just gone to the bathroom and intended to return to sleep immediately after, surprising her now might be more of a nuisance than anything.

She decided to refrain from calling out to her now and planned to prostrate herself the next morning. Ayano thought it would be more considerate. Yes, that is what she should do.

Then, just as she resolved to prostrate herself only next morning, Ayano suddenly noticed a subtle sense of uneasiness.

"…?"

Yumi's footsteps echoed as she walked down the corridor ahead.

They seemed unsteady, even accounting for the fact that she had just woken up. Furthermore, it became apparent that Yumi wasn't heading towards the restroom.

Where is she going…

Feeling somewhat worried, Ayano followed Yumi. Upon seeing the room Yumi swayed into, Ayano was greatly perplexed.

The piano room? What could she be doing at this hour…

Surely, Yumi wouldn't be playing the piano at such a late time. If not, perhaps she forgot something in the room… Thinking so, Ayano peeked through the slightly open door and blinked.

Yumi-sama…?

Moonlight streaming into the room, Yumi sat in front of the grand piano. However, that was all. Without opening the lid of the piano,

her gaze kept fixed between the keys and the music stand, seemingly staring at something that wasn't there.

"!"

The unnaturalness of Yumi's actions made Ayano shudder.

Realizing the cause of this strange behavior, Ayano felt a chill running down her spine. Unable to bear it, she was about to call out to Yumi and wake her up, when…

"Wait."

Startled by the voice that came from beside her, Ayano turned around. Then, as she looked up at the large figure looming over her, her eyes widened.

"Master—"

Her attempt to speak was silenced by a raised hand. Ayano kept her mouth shut. Slowly, Gensei approached Yumi, who was still staring at the piano, and spoke to his daughter with a gentle voice.

"Yumi."

Despite her father's call, Yumi showed no particular reaction.

However, without saying anything more, Gensei quietly continued to watch over her.

Suddenly, Yumi's eyes closed slowly, and her body leaned precariously. Before Ayano could rush over in surprise, as if anticipating it, Gensei supported Yumi's body. With strength that didn't seem fitting for someone about to turn seventy, he lifted the completely limp Yumi.

"Master, let me—"

"It's fine."

Rejecting Ayano's quietly offered assistance, Gensei carried Yumi to her room. Anxiously following behind, Ayano watched as Gensei, with unwavering steps, reached Yumi's room and laid her on the bed.

And as Gensei quietly left the room and closed the door, Ayano couldn't help but inquire.

“Um, Master… What happened to Yumi-sama…”

Choosing not to use the decisive term sleepwalking, Ayano asked in a hushed voice, and Gensei sighed lightly before answering.

“Even after Naotaka’s death, she occasionally experienced *that*… I thought she had recovered after meeting Kyotarou. But it seems to have started again a few days ago.”

“A few days ago…?”

Thinking back to what happened around that time, Ayano widened her eyes.

“You should go to sleep too. Keep this matter strictly confidential.

That goes for Yuki as well, and Yumi herself.”

With only this order, Gensei headed to his bedroom that was right next door without even giving a greeting, leaving Ayano standing there in astonishment.

I…

If Yumi’s sleepwalking was indeed due to psychological stress, there was only one event that Ayano could think of as the cause.

Was what I did an unnecessary interference…?

At the Cultural Festival, Ayano had brought Yumi to listen to Masachika’s piano performance. She did it with the thought that showing Masachika’s determination to move forward might reduce the burden of regret on Yumi’s troubled heart. However…

Masachika-sama… It seems I have made a mistake…

Regret and a sense of powerlessness envelop Ayano’s entire being.

In the end, with her shallow wisdom, she couldn’t save Yumi’s heart. Of course not. Even Yuki couldn’t save Yumi’s heart. Yuki too… and surely Kyotaro as well, while they could heal Yumi’s heart, they could not save it. If anyone could save Yumi’s heart, it would be…

“……”

Looking up at the moon floating in the night sky, Ayano prayed.

She knew. The wounds in Masachika's heart ran deeper than the ones Yumi carried.

So, she couldn't put it into words. Being powerless and untalented, all she could do was wish.

That her respected master will save Yumi… and Yuki.

"Please…"

Locking away the unspoken plea in her heart, Ayano swiveled away on her heel.

Chapter 1 - First Love

Following the morning session of the sports festival and the horseback competition as a part of the campaign for the next student council president, the schoolyard of Seirei Academy was filled with a bright and lively atmosphere. However, farther from the schoolyard, in the contrasting quiet interior of the school building…

"*Phew…*"

After leaving the classroom of Class 1-B and walking for a bit, Masachika Kuze let out a small sigh. Following their defeat in the horseback competition against the Yuki-Ayano pair, Masachika had encouraged Alisa, who was feeling down alone in the classroom, and promised to celebrate her birthday. But now, as he confidently left the classroom, all he could do was recall his own behavior as he shuddered.

Oh, man, I was being so cheesy… I'm cringe.

Shame had already started to well within him, and Masachika quickly headed to the school grounds to have lunch. While walking and searching for his grandparents, he noticed his grandfather, Tomohisa, who had spotted him first, raise his hand with a quick wave.

"Hey, Masachika! Over here, over here!"

"Hey, don't call me so loudly every time, it's embarrassing…"

Although they didn't draw much attention as the surrounding families were having meals too, Masachika, being an adolescent boy, couldn't hide his embarrassment. He dropped his shoulders and headed towards his grandparents in a somewhat sneaky manner.

“Ah~, Masachika, you came at the right time~. Come on, have a seat.”

While offering a wry smile to his innocent and lively grandmother, Asae, Masachika sat down on the picnic sheet.

“Here’s a hand towel.”

“Ah, thanks.”

He had washed his hands in the restroom after the horseback competition, but he decided to lightly wipe his hands with the towel handed to him anyway. Glancing around, he confirmed that his mother, who had been with his grandparents earlier, was not present. At the same time, he realized his father wasn’t there either.

“Dad hasn’t arrived yet, huh? He sent a morning message saying he’d be here around noon.”

“Well, maybe he’s running late? Maybe missed his flight or something.”

“Missed a flight? He’s not traveling by plane, you know.”

As Masachika responded with a sarcastic comment, Asae, who had opened a bento box, let out a cheerful voice.

“Now, eat up! I’ve prepared a lot of ham that Masachika likes!”

“Yeah, it’s really thick-cut…”

“Doesn’t it look delicious that way?”

As Asae happily shared a meal with her grandson, Masachika couldn’t help but feel a sense of shyness about dining with his grandparents in public. However, in the face of her pure smile, he found himself unable to say anything.

“Itadakimasu.”

With hands clasped together, he lightly bowed his head and obediently reached for the chopsticks in the bento his grandmother had prepared. Watching Masachika in such a manner, both Asae and Tomohisa observed him with joy… and a slightly relieved smile.

⋆･☆･⋆

"*Fuuuh*… I ate too much."

Walking around the area near the sports ground to ease his stomach, Masachika mumbled to himself. Despite intending to eat in moderation to not affect his performance in the events he would participate in the afternoon, he couldn't resist overindulging due to Asae's persistence.

Right… Maybe I'll check in at the infirmary for a bit.

Spontaneously deciding so, Masachika headed towards the school building. The reason was that in the horseback competition that had just happened, their side had faced some casualties, specifically Nonoa.

Seems like they tackled her pretty hard… They probably made the kind of tackle that would be penalized in something like rugby.

At the forefront of the charge, Masachika couldn't help but chuckle as he imagined the girl who likely initiated the tackle. However, considering that Nonoa, who made the most spectacular impact, was the one injured the most, his chuckle was filled with a sense of remorse.

Even though it was just a scrape, when he thought that a girl, especially one involved in modeling, had been injured for their cause, Masachika felt a greater sense of regret.

She seemed nonchalant about it… Really, it's scary how fearless she can be. It's reassuring when she's on your side, but…

Regardless of the method, what she did was for the sake of ensuring victory for Alisa and Masachika. If she was still resting in the infirmary, it was only natural to bring some snacks as a considerate gesture.

By the way, as for Takeshi, he had an "honorable" injury when he tried to protect Sayaka, who almost fell due to the impact of the tackle.

Somehow, Sayaka's arm or back hit his face, causing a nosebleed.

Although Takeshi's face was oddly red and Sayaka's attitude seemed subtly awkward… Masachika chose not to inquire about what truly happened. The specifics of how he protected her and their points of contact were vague, but he didn't delve into it. Lucky accidents

between friends could be tricky to react to, even if openly discussed.

Now, as for Nonoa…

Peeking into the infirmary through the wide-open sliding door, Masachika noticed that the curtain of the bed in the foreground was drawn closed.

Is someone sleeping in here?

Thinking it would be inappropriate to raise his voice if someone was indeed sleeping, Masachika quietly entered the infirmary and silently scanned the room. Perhaps the school nurse was temporarily away, as there was no sign of anyone in the visible area.

No one's here… Maybe they've already returned.

Deciding it was fine if that were the case, Masachika was about to leave the infirmary when—

"Are you calm now?"

The voice of a man came from right beside him, beyond the curtain, prompting Masachika to freeze in place.

Huh, why?

Thinking the voice resembled someone he knew, he instinctively listened more closely. However, upon hearing a different voice—one he would never forget, no matter how many years passed—his heart froze.

"Yeah… I'm sorry for suddenly breaking down into tears…"

It was a voice he had sought at times and avoided at others—the voice of his mother.

Realizing simultaneously that the voice from earlier was undoubtedly his father's, Masachika became even more bewildered.

Why? Why??

Question marks swirled in Masachika's mind. Why were these two people together? Did Tomohisa and Asae lie? Why…

"It's okay. Can you tell me why?"

“I don’t know… When I was watching Yuki-san and Masachika-san, somehow…”

“I see… You don’t have to rush. It doesn’t matter if you don’t have it all sorted out. Can you talk to me about it slowly?”

As if firmly anchored in place, Masachika’s ears absorbed the voices of the two. Amid the whirlwind of confusion, his brain failed to comprehend what he was hearing, but he understood that a definite affection flowed between them.

The moment he recognized this fact.

“!!”

Before he knew it, Masachika had burst out of the infirmary.

“*Hah, haah… ugh.* ”

Breathing heavily as if after a prolonged sprint, he leaned against the hallway wall. The floor of the corridor in his field of vision seemed strangely blurry.

He knew. He knew that even after their divorce, those two often met. His father, Kyotarou, never said anything, but Masachika had sensed it without needing to be told. But…

Why… In the past, it was more…

When it came to vivid images etched in Masachika’s brain of his parents, all he could recall was the sight of his troubled father being emotionally scolded by his mother. Yet… the voices he had just heard through the curtain were from a time when they got along better than that…

Why, why…

The confusion swirling in his mind refused to vanish. It was as if his thoughts were dragged down to the depths of a whirlpool.

If there were still feelings exchanged between his parents, if there was a mutual desire to support each other, why did they part ways?

What was the purpose… for whom…

A violent feeling of nausea suddenly overwhelmed him, and Masachika instinctively covered his mouth. Then, as he straightened his previously hunched back, he took a deep breath with trembling lungs.

"*Nn, guuh…*"

He swallowed what had welled up from the depths of his chest and blinked repeatedly, forcing his blurred vision to return to its original state. Just then, turning the corner of the corridor ahead, Ayano appeared. Furthermore, from behind her was the presence of an even more unexpected person, and Masachika gazed in astonishment.

"!"

At the same time, it seemed the other party also noticed him, as Ayano, who was leading the way, stopped for a few moments. However, since the person behind her did not stop, Ayano, showing signs of disturbance with a blink, resumed walking.

Why…

Seeing Gensei Suou, his maternal grandfather, walking behind Ayano after several years of not meeting, Masachika was left dumbfounded. Despite the passage of time, there was no decline in his dignity and vibrant appearance. The cold, piercing gaze that looked at him showed no sign of change either. Judging by the suit he wore, he might have taken a break from work or perhaps was on his way back.

Thinking about such matters, the distance between them closed, and when Gensei stopped about two meters away, he looked down at Masachika.

"It's been a while."

"……"

Masachika hesitated in response to what seemed like a greeting.

In the past, he used to speak politely as the son of a distinguished family, but in their current relationship, he wondered if it was necessary to use formal language. Yet, using casual language would still be hindered by their ingrained hierarchical relationship over the years.

"…What brings you here?"

As a result, what came out of Masachika's mouth was a question with inadequate language, neither formal nor casual. In response, Gensei merely raised an eyebrow slightly.

Those cold, perceptive eyes, penetrating deep into his expression, made Masachika feel as if Gensei had seen through everything about him. Immediately afterward, an indescribable mix of shame and defiance welled up within him.

"I heard that Yumi collapsed. I came to pick her up."

However, Gensei spoke without any apparent concern for Masachika's inner struggle, and he simply passed by him.

"In any case, it's none of your concern."

In the words spoken in passing, a sense of rebellion surged in Masachika's chest. He turned around abruptly, glaring at Gensei's back, but…

"Ah…"

But all he could muster was a half-opened mouth, with no words coming out. Unable to come up with any retort to the simple phrase

"none of your concern," Masachika could only watch Gensei pass by.

Alternating between Masachika's face and Gensei's back, Ayano showed a perplexed expression.

"……"

After a few seconds of hesitation, Ayano eventually bowed to Masachika and followed Gensei.

The possibility of running into Yumi again passed through Masachika's mind as he watched the two enter the infirmary without looking.

"*Haah…*"

Exiting the school building, he looked up at the sky. He sighed heavily, releasing a long breath from the depths of his chest into the autumn sky, recording an out-of-season summer day.

"……"

There was no more nausea. Only the feeling of having escaped again filled his heart.

"*Ugh*."

The voice, without accompanying nausea, raised the question of what or whom it was directed towards. Without any self-awareness or self-analysis, Masachika shook his head lightly and obligatorily headed towards the student council tent.

Whether the other officers were still having their meals or busy with work, the area under the tent was deserted. Not in the mood to talk to anyone, Masachika found it convenient and roughed himself onto a collapsible chair.

Heh… If I keep this up, Masha-san might come to comfort me again…

While distractedly thinking about such things, a couple of seconds of absent-mindedness passed, and a flash of realization struck Masachika's mind.

Wh-What happened to Yuki?

Realizing that, a strong anger surged within him towards his own belated concern for his sister. Fueled by the impulse to smack himself, Masachika rushed out of the tent and began searching for Yuki.

Scanning the crowd around him, he walked around the perimeter of the schoolyard. Eventually, he spotted Yuki near the entrance gate talking to a few students who seemed to be part of the organizing committee. Without hesitation, Masachika ran towards her.

"Yuki!"

In response to the loud call, not only Yuki but also the surrounding students turned to look. Sensing a curiosity-filled gaze

from his surroundings, Masachika hesitated for a moment. Soon, he realized the meaning behind those stares.

Oh, right. We…

Just a few dozen minutes ago, they were rivals in what was considered by many to be a de facto election battle. The two had confronted each other as opposing sides. Now, the students around them were curious about what kind of conversation the two would

have.

The details of the election had completely slipped Masachika's mind due to various subsequent events, and he gritted his teeth at the unexpected attention from the surroundings.

Perhaps noticing her brother's unease, Yuki walked towards Masachika and greeted him with a ladylike smile.

"Oh my, what's the matter, Masachika-kun? Why are you in such a hurry?"

"……"

Aware of the public eye, Yuki adopted a demeanor that was somewhat out of character for her, making Masachika ponder how to respond.

"…Are you okay?"

The result was an abstract inquiry. In response, Yuki tilted her head slightly before answering.

"Ah, are you talking about the horseback competition? I'm fine.

Alisa-san caught me securely."

Masachika understood the meaning behind her answer. Yuki comprehended his question too, and, understanding that he was disguising their conversation with the topic of the recent horseback competition, she assured him, "I'm fine." Realizing this clearly, Masachika found himself unable to say anything more.

If they were still a pair in the election, like from their junior high days, Masachika might have forcefully taken Yuki aside and shown concern for her feelings. But now, they were rival candidates, and any misstep could lead to misunderstandings and speculations. Therefore, Masachika couldn't say anything more.

"Thank you for your concern. Well then, I have some work to do."

"Ah… I see."

Unable to do anything but watch his departing sister, Masachika felt the curious gazes of those around him gradually shifting away. With a sense of powerlessness, Masachika walked with heavy steps towards the student council tent. Along the way, he heard a familiar voice that was accustomed to him.

“Masachika-sama.”

Lifting his face at the call, he found Ayano in her gym uniform.

She had likely returned after seeing off Gensei and the others.

Looking at his childhood friend’s face, Masachika weakly smiled and spoke with a slightly hoarse voice.

“Sorry, Ayano… Take care of Yuki for me.”

In response to Masachika’s request, which was tinted with exhaustion, Ayano bowed as usual.

“Leave it to me.”

However, unlike usual, it didn’t end there.

“But…”

“?”

Raising an eyebrow as if a question mark appeared on top of his head, Masachika saw Ayano’s gaze wandering a bit before she decisively spoke.

“I believe what Yuki-sama needs the most right now is…

Masachika-sama.”

“!”

“Excuse me, then.”

The words, accompanied by what seemed like a reproachful look, pierced sharply into Masachika’s chest. Bowing once again to the bewildered Masachika, Ayano walked past him and continued on her way.

Unable to even see her off, Masachika slowly lowered his head and returned to the student council tent. Seating himself on a folding chair in the empty tent, he squinted his eyes as he gazed at the sunlit, dazzling ground. Then, he muttered to himself.

“It’s cold…”

⋆･☆･⋆

Let's rewind a bit to the moment when Alisa was left alone in the classroom after Masachika had left, where she found herself in the midst of confusion.

Love? Me, in love? With whom? With Masachika-kun?!

Her mind repeated questions to herself and answers that she had lost count of.

No, that can't be… I mean, I can't be in love, it's impossible.

Despite her attempts to deny it, her chest resonated with a strange sense of happiness. Unable to bear it any longer, Alisa covered her face with both hands and forcefully sat down on the chair.

Calm down, Alisa Kujou! Remember your ideals!

And then, with strong words, she scolded herself. Yes, her ideals…

to be perfect. She wanted to live a life that would not bring shame to anyone, including herself. As a person and as a woman.

In Alisa's view, there were two ideal images of women. One was the independent woman, someone who could stand firm on her own without needing a man—a path to becoming a solid individual. It was cool. Undoubtedly cool. And the other… was a woman as a half of two people deeply connected like yin and yang. Meeting a perfect and ideal partner destined by fate, walking through life as each other's unique and irreplaceable companions, supporting and uplifting each other.

Beautiful. It could be described as a life recognized as beautiful by everyone.

That's right… the person who becomes a partner in my life must be perfect, ideal, and destined!

If they were perfect and ideal, they naturally had to be a match for her in every aspect. In other words…

Face, figure, intelligence, athletic ability… and, if possible, while being gentlemanly and kind.

Adding a slight wish at the end of the overflowing self-evaluation, Alisa, who didn't particularly care about appearance, considered the last part of the wish to be the most important.

Regardless of whether she was aware of it or not, Alisa calmly evaluated Masachika again. First, his appearance.

"……"

Closing her eyes, picturing Masachika's figure in her mind, Alisa crossed her arms, slightly pursed her lips, and fiddled with her hair.

Well… isn't he fine? When I first saw him, I thought he had a somewhat bland face, but when you look closely… he's quite… well, very handsome, isn't he? And his physique from when we went to the sea… well, it wasn't bad either.

Recalling Masachika's physique from their trip to the sea, Alisa cleared her throat. Appearance-wise, he passed. Next is the ability aspect.

Intelligence… he's smart, right? At least he has a very fast thought process… and his athletic ability seems to be quite good too?

Huh? Thinking about it…

The moment she thought that Masachika-kun was quite perfect and ideal, the mental image of Masachika in her mind donned a nonchalant, unenthusiastic face, irritating her.

That's right… he should be excellent in terms of abilities, but his essential motivation is lacking! That guy!

With the embarrassment of momentarily thinking of Masachika as an ideal partner, Alisa began enumerating her dissatisfaction with him.

Always with the carefree and lighthearted attitude of his…

irresponsible, mean, and always looking down on me like a child!

Sloppy, has bed hair often, is always glancing at my chest or legs, gets along with a lot of girls, and is not gentlemanly at all!

Shouting in her mind, Alisa took a deep breath. However, soon a somewhat lonely feeling welled up within her, and simultaneously, a single word surfaced from the depths of her heart.

—But… kind.

That inner voice cooled Alisa's heated mind. Opening her eyes, she looked at the desk, where a bottle wrapped in a handkerchief was

placed. A testament to Masachika's kindness.

Yes, that's right… he has always been kind. Masachika-kun.

Even before becoming a pair for student council and afterward, Masachika showed her a lot of kindness. Remembering those moments filled her heart with a gentle warmth. Alisa smiled as if on the verge of tears, but suddenly she snapped back to reality, shaking her head.

"No… that's not enough… I can't decide my life partner based on that alone…"

Clamping her back teeth together, Alisa whispered to herself in a soft voice. Yes, it wasn't enough. They had to be perfect, ideal, and destined.

If it's destiny… it should feel like she was able to sense the future between the two the moment they first met. So, how was her first encounter with Masachika?

…He was sleeping.

After the opening ceremony of the first year of high school, Alisa remembered Masachika, who was sleeping with his head on the desk next to her. There was no fragment of shock or romance. It was a zero-point encounter in terms of a romantic drama.

It's hopeless. It doesn't feel like destiny at all—

Brushing her hair behind her, Alisa smirked playfully. But once again, she was immediately attacked by another wave of loneliness, and her heart whispered.

—But, he reached out his hand.

"Shut up and take my hand! Alya!"

Thinking back, that was the true beginning. Since then, they have been walking together as partners. This itself might be considered a kind of destiny…

No, that's wrong! If we call it destiny… if we're going to date, we have to get married!

For Alisa, casual dating without consideration for the future was no different from playing around. It wasn't something a lady like her idealized. If she were to date someone, it should naturally be with the

intention of marriage.

Can I marry him!? Masachika-kun!?

As if pouring cold water on her own fervor, Alisa deliberately questioned herself with strong words.

That's right, although he has improved somewhat now, Masachika was still inherently lazy and tended to be a hassle. If she were to marry such a man, she would undoubtedly be stressed every day and constantly irritated. He would be lazy and sloppy, and he probably wouldn't be able to wake up until the last minute. Alisa would have to wake him up every morning. And that guy, with his playful and joking demeanor, would probably say things like "I can't get up unless you give me a good morning kiss" with a smirk on his face. *Hmm*, not bad.

Isn't that bad!?

Adding a self-mocking comment to her own thoughts, Alisa writhed in her chair.

"Ahhhh~, geez~!"

Putting an end to the roundabout thoughts oscillating between denial and affirmation, Alisa exclaimed. Then, after resetting her mind

and sinking wearily into the chair, a self-deprecating thought popped up in her now empty brain.

What am I doing, really…

It's absurd. She couldn't be honest, desperately denying her feelings, telling herself that Masachika was not an ideal partner, then refusing to accept said notion that Masachika was not an ideal partner, and then denying it again herself.

It was like wrestling with yourself. The more excuses she makes…

the more evident it becomes that she was helplessly drawn to Masachika.

Not ideal? Not destined? So what? These feeble excuses couldn't deny the fact that her feelings are far from light.

"Futile excuses? After living obsessively pursuing my ideal self, am I now denying that way of life?"

In her mind, perhaps her calm self was raising a voice.

“Are you just getting carried away with your first love? There’s a possibility that you’ll find someone closer to your ideal in the future.

It’s insane to decide on a life partner at this early stage, especially when you’ve only met so few men. It’s not sane.”

What this voice is saying is probably correct. Even in her current state, she understood that it was the most reasonable thing. If someone were to say she’s insane, maybe she is. If someone were to say she’s crazy in love, perhaps that’s true too.

But even so, she couldn’t help but think that was fine.

“(Really, I’m out of my mind.)”

Alisa used to secretly ridicule women who regretted dating worthless men. She thought it was because they didn’t choose their partners properly. One should be able to tell whether someone is a worthless man even before dating. But oh, that was a mistake. It was the foolish talk of an inexperienced girl who didn’t know love.

There’s nothing she could do once she falls in love for real. If she genuinely likes someone, she wouldn’t be able to help herself but overlook all their flaws, no matter how visible they might be.

“I like him…”

Whispering quietly. Carefully, tenderly, as if confirming.

“I like Masachika-kun…”

The words, shaped with genuine emotion, permeated through her ears to her brain. Just that was enough to fill her heart with a sense of happiness. It was embarrassing and joyful. It made her want to roll around or burst into a dance on the spot. Such a feeling could only be described as being ecstatic.

“*Nfufu～♡*”

Subconsciously, Alisa pressed her hands against her cheeks, trying to control the smile that threatened to break. Oh, how can one resist something like this? In the face of this happiness, logic, and reason were all rendered utterly powerless. Denying this love with such things would be to just imagine sadness.

Then, at that moment,

“We apologize for interrupting your lunch break. This is an announcement regarding a lost item, a smartphone with a strap featuring a red cat.”

Suddenly interrupted by the announcement, Alisa sat up straight from her chair, checking the classroom clock.

“Eh, it’s already this late!?”

How much time has she spent here? If she doesn’t hurry and eat, she’ll be late for the afternoon events.

“This won’t do…!”

She rushed out of the classroom, and as she did, she glanced at her reflection in the window glass.

“*Hm!* ”

Slapping her cheek once, Alisa tightened her expression. Even now, her heart is filled with an uplifting feeling. But if she were to show it openly, she knows she’d be relentlessly questioned by her sister and mother.

“*Nn*, alright!”

Putting on a serious expression once again, Alisa headed back to the schoolyard. Then, she hastily ate her lunch just before the end of the lunch break, deflecting the inquiries from her worried sister and parents.

“Well then, Alya-chan, I have something to help with over there.”

“Should I come too?”

“Nah, it’s okay～. Thanks.”

Smiling lightly, she parted ways with her sister, who shook her head, heading alone towards the student council tent. And there, catching sight of Masachika alone in the tent… her heart raced.

The happiness she temporarily suppressed surged up again from the depths of her chest, and Alisa tightly furrowed her brows, applying force to her expression. Then, casually pretending to be caught by the breeze, she entered the tent.

“Good work.”

“Yeah… Are you okay now?”

At Masachika’s question, Alisa momentarily didn’t quite understand what he was talking about. She froze for a few seconds, then finally realized he was referring to the defeat in the horseback competition.

“Eh, yes, I’m fine now. I’m sorry for worrying you.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

He said it so casually, shrugging his shoulders. Such nonchalant kindness was genuinely comforting for Alisa at this moment. She almost couldn’t help but let a smile break out, hastily sitting on a collapsible chair as if to conceal it.

“Um, for the afternoon events, what are you participating in, Masachika-kun?”

“I don’t have anything specific until the dance. You too, Alya, right?”

“That’s right.”

An ordinary, casual conversation as always. Even such conversations felt enjoyable now, and Alisa turned to Masachika with a smile.

“Speaking of which—”

And then, at that moment, Alisa finally noticed something strange about Masachika’s demeanor. His usually relaxed expression looked somewhat vacant, and his gaze was fixed on something in the distance.

“?”

Following his gaze… and seeing the person he was looking at, Alisa felt as if a bucket of cold water had been dumped on her.

Yuki-san…

There, she saw Yuki talking to the organizing committee.

Masachika’s eyes, staring intently at that scene, harbored a profoundly complex mix of emotions… Emotions pondering the reality that the person you like may not reciprocate the same feelings. This simple truth was now etched sharply into Alisa’s heart.

Oh…

In her mind, the image resurfaced of Masachika playing the piano while thinking of someone else. The constant surge of happiness from within her chest had now momentarily frozen in place.

No, I can't cry…

Exposed to abrupt waves of emotions, the seawall of her heart seemed to be on the verge of collapsing before it could even prepare itself. Stirred by an intense sense of crisis, Alisa stood up abruptly.

"I'm going to help out for a bit…"

Suppressing her emotions, she managed to say only that before promptly turning on her heel.

"*Hm?* Oh…"

Masachika let out a slightly puzzled sound as Alisa walked away, but he didn't try to stop her or chase after her.

And once again, with emotions swirling inside her, Alisa swiftly left the scene.

"…What's going on? What is this…"

Just a short while ago, everything felt so happy, and every little thing was joyful and enjoyable. Now, it felt like she could even despise everything in the world.

"What… is this?"

As Alisa bit her lip, and Masachika quietly gazed at Yuki, an announcement signaling the start of the afternoon events echoed, seemingly oblivious to the emotional turmoil unfolding.

Chapter 2 - Lie

"Sorry, I couldn't watch your heroic moment, Masachika."

"Well, that's not a big deal, but…"

After successfully participating in the sports festival, Masachika returned home and was having dinner with his father, Kyotarou, whom he hadn't seen in a while. He casually shrugged his shoulders in response to his apologetic father and looked down at his dinner.

“More importantly, I wanted to comment on the fact that our dinner is fish and chips from England.”

“Why? Isn’t it delicious?”

“Beyond the taste, the problem is how much time has passed.

Now that the potatoes are all soggy, it’s like the fries have been left to soak in oil.”

“Well, I think that adds to the charm.”

“I can’t comprehend that…”

His father’s taste in souvenirs was new and was particularly evident when it came to food. Masachika had always believed that his father had a relatively broad palate, enjoying any foreign dish he came across, but secretly, he suspected that his father might just have an undiscerning sense of taste.

Should I have heated it in the toaster instead of just microwaving it…?

Looking at the half-eaten fish and chips, Masachika regretted his decision belatedly.

Seeing his son’s displeased expression, Kyotarou furrowed his brow.

“In Japan, people say British food is bad, but that’s not true… I wanted you to experience the authentic taste.”

“If this is considered authentic taste, even the British would be offended.”

Despite complaining about why his father had not chosen a dish that wouldn’t lose its flavor over time, Masachika still finished his dinner dutifully. Then, he washed away the greasiness with British tea, taking a relieved breath.

“Ah, this tea is delicious without any issues though.”

Pleased with the unusually high-quality souvenir, Masachika expressed his satisfaction, and Kyotarou, enjoying the aroma of the tea, replied, “Apparently, these tea leaves are the same ones supplied to the royal family.”

“Really? That’s impressive.”

As he delved into such information, Masachika felt the sense of its preciousness increase, and he brought the cup closer to his nose to savor the fragrance. In doing so, he recalled the image of his mother, who loved tea.

…I wonder if he gave them the same souvenirs as well.

Recalling the voices from the infirmary, he couldn't help but think back to what had happened. Just as he was about to cut off his thoughts as usual, Masachika hesitated.

"—How's mom?"

"What?"

"…Is mom doing okay?"

Kyotarou, who had likely been avoiding that topic, widened his eyes slightly. Then, looking down at his cup, he smiled gently at Masachika.

"Yeah, she just had a slight health issue."

"……"

A lie. Her condition was not something that could be lightly dismissed.

However, Kyotarou wouldn't say anything even if he pressed further. Moreover, it was difficult for Masachika himself to focus on his mother any longer.

Yet… even so, there was something he desperately wanted to know.

"…Dad, you know…"

"*Hmm?* "

"About Mom… Do you still love her?"

At Masachika's question, Kyotarou widened his eyes behind his glasses, then chuckled.

"Yeah… I still love her, always."

"!"

The response left Masachika breathless. The thoughts that had smoldered in the depths of his heart since the conversation in the infirmary had been lingering in his mind for a while now.

It seemed that the reason his parents separated was—

“But you know… we needed distance and time.”

Kyotarou denied Masachika’s convictions, which had almost become certainties. He looked up at Masachika, gazing gently into his eyes, and spoke as if convincing him.

And with his gaze gently meeting Masachika’s lifted eyes, he spoke as if coaxing him.

“I… couldn’t support Yumi. I thought that if we stayed together, I would end up hurting her. That’s why we decided to part ways.”

He firmly believed that the fault laid with himself. Kyotarou continued as he spoke with a gentle yet sorrowful expression.

That’s also a lie.

Masachika intuitively felt that way. Regarding his parents’

divorce, it seemed unlikely that he wasn’t partly responsible for the cause. However, even so, thanks to Kyotarou asserting otherwise, his guilt dampened. And so…

“…I see.”

Masachika, too, nodded with a faint smile. Knowing it was a lie.

Pretending not to notice his father’s kind lie, he smiled. In response, his father also returned a smile.

The two, exchanging gentle and sorrowful smiles, were indeed a strikingly similar father and son.

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The following day.

The Kuze residence’s living room, where father and son were having a late breakfast, lingered in a somewhat dim atmosphere, as if the air from the previous night had carried over.

Masachika silently ate his meal while deep in thought, and Kyotarou calmly observed his son with gentle eyes. Few words were exchanged, with only the sound of utensils clinking echoing in the room.

Suddenly, a clattering sound boomed through as the entrance door swung open. Following the sound of hurried footsteps in the corridor, the door connecting to the entrance swung open energetically.

“Hello, my beloved Onii-chan-sama! And… my beloved Papa too!”

Interrupting the father-son pair during breakfast, Yuki, with her ponytail swaying, greeted them cheerfully. While slightly taken aback by his energetic daughter’s morning enthusiasm, Kyotarou stood up from his chair, spreading his arms in a theatrical gesture.

“Ah, my beloved darling～”

“Hey!”

Rushing towards her, Yuki gave him a passionate hug with a tackle-like force. Accepting it effortlessly, Kyotarou also gently embraced her back. Then, as they released the hug simultaneously, they both, for some reason, turned their gazes towards Masachika.

“…Hey, what is it? I’m still in the middle of eating.”

“Which is more important, me or your meal!?”

“For now, my meal.”

“Then if I finish it for you, it means I’ll be the most important, right?”

“Stop with the yandere-like demeanor.”

“Now, now, give her a hug already.”

“It’s like we’re relatives of a unicorn.”

While replying to his father like that, Masachika, with a sigh, stood up and spread his arms out wide.

“Alright!”

As if waiting for that, Yuki rushed towards her brother and jumped just before reaching him.

Jumping with both hands and feet, she hugged her brother… or

rather, clung onto him.

“There, there.”

With a slight wry smile, Masachika stroked his sister’s back as if soothing her, and then sat down on the chair with Yuki still on him.

And, in that position, he resumed eating.

“Yuki, your hair is in the way. Move it a bit.”

“Okay~”

As instructed by her brother, Yuki skillfully changed her position on Masachika’s legs. Placing both her legs on Masachika’s thighs, she adopted a sideways embrace position. Then, picking up a half-eaten toast, she brought it to her brother’s mouth.

“Here, *aah~n*.”

“*Aah~*”

“I didn’t say you guys had to go that far, did I?”

Unable to resist, Kyotarou interjected, and both siblings looked puzzled at him.

“Hey, what’s with that look? And Yuki, isn’t there too much of a difference in the way you treat me and Masachika?”

Without feeling sorry for her lonely-looking father, Yuki responded without hesitation.

“Well, Papa, it’s simply just a difference in likability.”

“How can you say such a cruel thing with pure eyes…”

“In your case, Dad, you need to increase your likeability to trigger the “*aah~n*” event.

“Life’s tough…”

Kyotarou dropped his shoulders dejectedly. Yuki, feeling a sense of guilt, furrowed her brows. She descended from Masachika’s lap and gently placed her hand on her father’s shoulder, as if to comfort him.

“Well, well, if it’s for Papa, who works hard every day and can’t find

time for his daughter, I've prepared a quick way for you to trigger that event."

"What is it?"

Looking up with a relieved expression, Kyotarou, Yuki's father, was met with a gentle gaze. Yuki formed a circle with her thumb and forefinger.

"Cha-ching♡"

"Don't try to farm money from working adults with gacha-style events!"

"…!"

"And you, don't search for your wallet! Buying favorability with money is just empty!"

"Is buying favorability with money really empty…? Can the same be said for salarymen who can't stop going to cabarets in the real world?"

"I can definitely say that. Especially in that case."

"Anyway, the ' *aah~n*' pickup gacha event is currently underway.

The event's drop rate is three percent—ten pulls for ten thousand yen.

You'll be guaranteed the limited rate-up item within a hundred pulls."

"A hundred thousand yen ceiling for a rate of one thousand yen per pull. That's crazy. And isn't it strange that a hundred pulls guarantees the item with that drop rate?"

"Well, you see, in this event, there are five different colors."

"What do you mean by colors?"

"Attributes."

"Attributes?"

"Blue is a cool ' *aah~n*', red is a passionate ' *aah~n*', green is a healing type ' *aah~n*', yellow is a tough ' *aah~n*', and pink is… you know?"

"No, I don't know. What is it?"

“Well, even if you’re my Onii-chan, you won’t know unless you pull and check…”

“Let’s skip that just for your older brother. Where’s the gacha?”

“My mouth.”

“Don’t try to hide the fact that there’s something fishy going on.”

“For now, give me a ten-pull, please.”

“Don’t just open your wallet and start pulling!”

Kyotarou, pulling out a ten-thousand-yen bill, received a full-on retort from Masachika. And with that, the living room of the Kuze

household had suddenly become lively. In the midst of it all, Yuki laughed genuinely from the bottom of her heart.

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“Alright, let’s go.”

After breakfast, as Masachika finished washing the dishes, Yuki, wearing sunglasses as if inviting someone for a drive, casually stuck her thumb out. Masachika, who didn’t know where they were going, blinked at her.”

“Where are we going?”

“Well, obviously shopping to buy things for Alya-san’s birthday party.”

“Oh, did we officially get invited?”

Masachika tilted his head, wondering if the other members she had planned on inviting had already been formally invited too.

“But I’ve already decided what to buy…”

“That’s why you’re coming with me so I can check～, you know? If I leave it all to Onii-chan, who knows what you’d end up buying.”

Being directly questioned about his taste by his sister, Masachika pursed his lips in annoyance.

“How rude… I do think about these things, you know?”

“Oh really? Then, by any chance, what do you plan to give?”

To Yuki, who had an expression that seemed to say, “I’ll just listen to what you have to say,” Masachika confidently answered.

“Of course, I feel like something handmade conveys more heartfelt feelings… I was thinking of giving her a handmade herbarium.”

It was something he had found on the internet while searching for a birthday present for Alisa. It was an interior decoration where flowers

were placed in a glass container and preserved in oil. Looking at the photos that came up in the search, he thought, “This would be a pretty tasteful gift for a woman.” Kyotarou seemed to agree, nodding as if impressed at Masachika’s words.

“*Hmm*, not a bad idea.”

“Yeah, right?”

With the approval of his father, Masachika raised his chin proudly. However—

“Well, honestly, it’s kinda meh.”

Interrupted by Yuki without mercy, Masachika and Kyotarou looked at her as she raised her opinion.

“…What’s wrong with it? It doesn’t hold the emotional weight of a bouquet, and you don’t have to water it. It’s not bad, right?”

Despite Masachika’s rebellious words, Yuki’s expression was far from favorable.

“No, I mean, herbariums are classified as interior decorations, right? In other words, you need to consider the compatibility factor with the room’s atmosphere… Onii-chan, do you even know what Alya-san’s room looks like?”

In response to this critique, Masachika found himself at a loss for words. To add insult, Yuki mercilessly launched a follow-up attack.

“In flower arranging, the choice of floral materials and vases changes depending on the room’s interior and where you place the flowers. How can you not notice that?”

“*Ugh*…”

“Moreover, the fact that Papa agreed with your proposal is already an indication that it’s not a good gift, right?”

“That’s true.”

“Isn’t that harsh!?”

Suddenly catching a stray, Kyotarou protested in shock. However, his children’s gazes remained cold.

“I felt Dad’s lack of taste yesterday too…”

“Grandma and grandpa, who love flashy things, are their own thing at this point, but Papa just lacks simple taste.”

“That’s not…”

Ignoring the crestfallen Kyotarou, Yuki entwined her arm with Masachika’s.

“So, leaving our tasteless Papa aside, how about we go shopping together～?”

“Can’t you let your father, who’s just come back after a long time, do some family service…?”

“You’ll be in Japan for a while longer this time, right～? For today—”

Having said that, Yuki closed her mouth and, after casually searching her pockets, smiled mischievously.

“Well, I thought so… but, Papa, can I ask you for a favor～?”

“*Hm?* What is it?”

Looking up at Kyotarou with an adorable tilt of her head, Yuki said, “I forgot my wallet at home ♡. Can you go get it for me?”

Kyotarou’s smile cracked at her request.

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“So, here we are, at the shopping mall.”

“Seriously, making Dad do such a thing…”

Dropping off only Masachika and Yuki, the siblings watched as

Kyotarou's car sped towards the Suou residence. Masachika wore an indescribable expression. Then, he suddenly realized that maybe they should have asked one of the Suou family servants to bring it instead.

"By the way… Where's Ayano today?"

"*Hm?* She seems to have something to do today."

"Is that so…"

In response to that answer, Masachika felt a slight sense of relief.

After all, he had received a sense of disapproval from Ayano during the sports festival, and they hadn't met since. Masachika still found it a bit awkward to face her.

At this point, Yuki, with a shy expression, covered her mouth with a fist and deliberately fidgeted.

"S-So… Today, we're alone, right, Onii-chan?"

"Even in that outfit of yours, the effect you're going for is only half as effective for me."

Twin tails tied high, a beret, and large sunglasses hiding her eyes—Masachika directed a sharp gaze at the familiar disguise style.

Perhaps even though she was facing downward while glancing upward, her eyes hidden behind the sunglasses gave off a suspicious effect rather than one of deliberate action.

"*Ugh*, my deadly upward glance didn't work? Could it be that there's such a drawback to my perfect disguise…!"

"Even if you hit me directly, your upward glance won't work on me, you know?"

"I have no choice; I'll have to seduce you with my body!"

"That's not what I meant."

Yuki clung to Masachika and snuggled up to him. Then, raising her voice in a tone more affectionate than usual, she pointed to one of the shops lining the sides of the street.

"Hey~, Onii-chan. I want to eat taiyaki[1]."

“No, buy it yourself.”

“I don’t have my wallet right now! Speaking as the funny man.”

“Come to think of it, that’s right, huh～? But as the funny man?”

“Oh, in a good way, okay?”

“That’s like turning a negative connotation into a positive one, don’t you think?”

“Well, but you know, it’s fitting to say it’s the funny man’s line considering our usual comedic exchange.”

“That’s true. I’m usually the straight man.”

“Exactly, because I’m usually the funny man.”[2]

Despite their banter, Masachika, with Yuki still clinging onto his arm, headed towards the shop, saying, “Well, if it’s just taiyaki.”

“So, which one do you want?”

“I want custard!”

“Sure thing. Excuse me, can we have one each of red bean and custard taiyaki, please?”

“Thank you. Red bean and custard. That will be 360 yen.”

“Ah, um… I should have 510 yen here.”

“Alright. Then, here’s your change of 150 yen.”

As Masachika paid the cashier, the lady working next to the cashier, packing the taiyaki in a heat-preserving container, turned toward Yuki with a smile.

“Siblings shopping together? You guys seem close～”

“Yeah!”

“Oh, what a lovely smile.”

The shopkeeper grinned at Yuki’s energetic response as she placed two small manjū[3] alongside the two taiyaki in a small plastic bag.

“Here, I added a little something extra for you.”

“Ah, how kind of—”

“Thank you!”

Interrupting the apologetic Masachika with a loud thank you, Yuki took the bag. Then, with a tug of Masachika’s hand, she waved enthusiastically at the staff and moved away from the store. The innocent behavior Yuki displayed made all the staff inside the store turn around and wave back with smiles.

As they reached a point where they couldn’t be seen from the taiyaki shop, Masachika, still facing forward, said with a serious expression, “You were definitely thought of as an elementary school student just now.”

“Heh, that’s the merit of this disguise…”

“Isn’t that just fraud?”

“Just because I acted bright and cheerful doesn’t mean it’s fraud.”

Nonchalantly taking a manjū from the plastic bag, Yuki took a bite.

“Mmm, delicious. As expected from this shop, their manjū is always tasty～”

“Oh really?”

Taking a manjū from the bag Yuki offered, Masachika also took a bite. Its thin and smooth skin crisply broke, and the red bean paste inside brought a perfect sweetness throughout the mouth.

“Indeed. This is really good.”

“See? Now, I’m curious about the taiyaki too…”

“Give me a little taste, okay? I’ll let you try some of mine too.”

“Yay!”

With childlike excitement, Yuki took out her taiyaki and bit into it carefully.

“*Ouch.* Hot, but tasty.”

“Don’t burn yourself, okay?”

Stopping at a place that didn't obstruct other pedestrians, they both enjoyed their taiyaki. Then, casually looking around, Yuki suddenly remarked, "There are a lot of people wearing masks, huh?"

"Yeah, I heard on TV that the flu is going around. Maybe that's why?"

"Ah, true… In that case, maybe I should have gone with a mask instead of sunglasses? Actually, which one is better as a disguise, a mask or sunglasses?"

"*Hmm*, I think it's still sunglasses. Your impression changes a lot when your eyes are hidden. For example, with Elena-senpai, it was the fact that her eyes were visible that gave away her disguise."

"You're talking about her mask, right? Sexy Mask, was it not? No, it was super obvious regardless."

"It's a common trope that you won't be exposed as long as you hide your eyes."

"Until you get recognized by the location of your mole."

"Yeah, that only happens in manga, so I won't even bother retorting."

"……"

"Don't hide your eyes with the back of your hand!"

Having this banter while finishing their taiyaki, Yuki looked up at Masachika and asked, "So, what about a present for Alya-san?"

Having his suggestion of gifting a herbarium shot down already before, Masachika explained with a wry smile.

"Well… I'll probably decide while looking around casually."

In response, Yuki raised her shoulders in a somewhat exasperated manner.

"Really… This is where your gentlemanly skills are tested, my dear brother. It's because you never casually inquire about what the women around you want or need that this ends up being the case."

"…So you say, but what are you planning to give then?"

"Me? Well, since Alya-san's smartphone protection film looked pretty scratched up, I thought about getting her a nice glass one."

“Huh.”

Masachika furrowed his brow at that unexpected choice.

It lacked the cuteness and stylishness typical for a girl-to-girl gift, but it was a practical choice. Since everyone uses their smartphones daily, a protective film is something they wouldn’t easily replace even if it got scratched, making it a thoughtful gift.

If anything, I could have bought it for her myself…

Rather than something like flowers, practicality-focused gifts seemed easier to give. Yet, he couldn’t snatch his sister’s suggestion.

“*Fufufu*, do you even know Alya-san’s smartphone model~? Our difference in preparation shows here, my dear Onii-chan-sama.”

“Ngh…”

Yuki smirked triumphantly, leaving Masachika with no room to refute. However, silently surrendering wasn’t his style, so he tried to come up with some form of objection.

“But, you know. Doesn’t getting someone a screen protector imply something like, ‘Your current one is dirty, so change it’?”

“Well, you could consider it as tension between rivals?”

“If you’ve already planned it out to that extent… it’s kinda a bit…”

Masachika wore an indescribable expression, but he was aware that he was simply being mean with his remark. However, not willing to give up silently, he turned on his heel without saying anything more.

Thus, while going around the shopping mall, Masachika started thinking about a gift.

“Oh, how about an aroma candle?”

“Scents are subjective, and would she even be happy to receive that?”

“Then, what about that stylish hourglass…?”

“Interior decorations depend on the room’s atmosphere, remember?”

“A calendar with pictures of dogs…”

“What if she already has a calendar?”

“What about that cute pink mobile power bank over there…?”

“Choosing a gift swayed by my choice, huh? Is that satisfying for your big brother pride?”

“Oh, um, good soap for the skin?”

“Giving bath-related items to a girl as a guy is a bit creepy. It might convey a message like ‘I want you to smell like this,’ and besides, if it’s soap, not only Alya-san but her whole family will end up using it.”

“…Just to be sure, accessories might have weird implications, right?”

“It might. Plus, I doubt my dear Onii-chan can choose something with good taste.”

“Well, if all else fails, how about playing it safe with sweets…?”

“Running away by giving consumable gifts, huh?”

“Whatever, how about something from a gift catalog?”

“Wouldn’t you just be avoiding the act of choosing something yourself? Besides, high schoolers don’t usually refer to catalogs when picking out a present, right?”

One by one, every suggestion was shot down, and Masachika’s confidence in his own taste was pulverized to a nanolevel. All he could do was muster a hollow laugh now.

“…So, what are you gonna do, big bro?”

As Yuki questioned him with a piercing gaze, Masachika responded with blatantly averting his own, chuckling awkwardly with a goofy expression.

“*Ahaha*～♪ Onii-chan has nooo clue whatsoever☆”

“*Kuh*, that was so cute.”

“Oi, cut it out.”

“It cleanses the soul…!”

“Cut it out, cut it out.”

Taking off her sunglasses, Yuki pressed between her eyes with her fingers as she looked up at the sky. Masachika, feeling a twinge of embarrassment, returned to a serious expression. Then, as he watched his sister playfully laugh and smile, he let out a deep sigh.

“Well… I guess I’ll just go with homemade sweets in the end…”

“Ahh~ …Well, not bad. Alya-san is a good home cook too, so she’ll appreciate it, and a guy who can cook or bake is often evaluated highly…”

“Well then, let’s go with that…”

In the end, after spending all that time looking around, they finished without buying anything. As Masachika felt a sense of relief wash over him, Yuki shrugged her shoulders lightly.

“Well, I said a lot, but… actually, I don’t think what you’ll give will be that important, you know?”

“Huh?”

Raising an eyebrow in confusion, Yuki made a clicking sound with her tongue, wagging her index finger as she explained with a smile.

“Giving is not about the physical object called the ‘present,’ but rather, it’s about the heart, my brother.”

“In other words, I need to put my heart into it? That’s why you’re suggesting I make something homemade, right?”

At Masachika’s words, Yuki raised both arms to shoulder height with a sigh.

“It’s not just that, is it…? What I’m saying is to convey your feelings through words and actions.”

Upon hearing this, Masachika finally understood what Yuki was getting at, prompting his cheeks to involuntarily twitch. At this reaction, Yuki, with a sly smile, places her index finger to her lips as she whispers mischievously.

“If you do what we’ve been doing every year… Alya-san’s favorability for you will skyrocket, leading to an instant event unlock, you know?”

What she was referring to was something that had become a tradition between siblings, started by Yuki at some point as a promise when

giving birthday presents. However…

"…No way, I can't do that in front of everyone else."

As Masachika refuted with a strained cheek, Yuki wrapped her arm around his shoulders with a malicious expression.

"Now, now, my brother, I'll skillfully assist in that regard… I'll make sure to create a good atmosphere for you two on the day, alright?"

"Wow, so reliable—nobody asked, though."

With a deadpan expression, Masachika pierced Yuki with a skeptical gaze at close range. Ignoring this, Yuki pointed at the escalator with a grin.

"Well, to make it perfect when the time comes, it's time for the next thing on our agenda: clothing."

"Clothing?"

As Masachika questioned what she was trying to get across, Yuki raised her eyebrows so much that they stuck out beyond her oversized sunglasses as she declared,

"You idiot! Wearing a formal jacket is a must for a party, you know!?"

"So noisy, don't shout in my ear… Wait, no, huh? I mean, it's just a birthday party, right? Moreover, one hosted by a middle-class family."

"Whether it's from a middle-class family or a schoolmate, when you're invited, formal wear is a must. You'll be meeting Alya-san's parents, you know?"

Masachika unintentionally flinched at that remark.

That's right, he had already exchanged brief greetings with Alisa's mother at the parent-teacher meetings, but at this birthday party, he will likely meet Alisa's father as well. As the only partner of his daughter who is running in the election campaign, he must introduce himself properly.

"…That's true."

"Jeez, get a grip… Alright, come on, let's go."

"Yes."

Prompted by his reliable sister, Masachika headed towards the men's formalwear section. He ended up buying some clothes that Yuki picked out, and then, following the flow, they headed to the women's clothing section. While following Yuki, he casually glanced at the nearby price tags and suddenly realized something.

"Wait a minute. I didn't bring enough money to buy clothes for the both of us, you know?"

"*Hm?* "

Unexpectedly facing an unplanned expense for his own clothes, Masachika realized he only had about two thousand yen left in his wallet. With this amount, he felt uneasy about buying Yuki's clothes.

However, Yuki responded by lightly shaking her phone.

"Well, most stores around here accept electronic payment nowadays. Just in case, I've got over 100,000 yen loaded on my account."

"For real…? Wait, then why did you need to ask Dad to go get your wallet?"

"… *Teehee☆*"

In response to Masachika's calm observation, Yuki stuck out her tongue playfully and lightly tapped her head. Giving her a deadpan stare, Masachika hesitated for a while before opening his mouth.

"…About Mom, is she really not feeling well?"

As Masachika spoke, Yuki, who had been carefully examining clothes, froze. That reaction alone was enough to fully convince him.

Forgetting her wallet at home was just an excuse.

Yuki wanted to get their father to be by their mother's side. In other words… Yumi needed Kyotarou.

As I thought, that's what it is…

Masachika recalled the conversation between their parents that he overheard in the infirmary. It was most likely that Yumi is in need of emotional help—

"No, she's perfectly fine…"

Masachika felt a sense of emptiness as Yuki completely denied his speculation with a dubious voice. As he repeatedly blinked at Yuki, she raised her head, tilting it suspiciously.

“Why did the conversation go there? Well, I can’t help but be surprised that Onii-chan, out of all people, started talking about Mom.”

“No, that’s…”

Yuki’s eyes, looking up at him, remained hidden behind her sunglasses, making them impossible to read. Masachika found himself unable to discern her thoughts.

“Well~, I don’t know what misunderstanding you have, but Mom is perfectly fine, you know~? Oh, this outfit looks nice.”

However, as Yuki quickly dismissed the topic and turned her face away, Masachika instinctively felt that he was being “dodged.”

“Oh, is it okay to try this on~?”

“Yes, please go this way~.”

And before he could pursue the matter, Yuki headed towards the fitting room, leaving Masachika with nowhere to reach with his outstretched hand.

“Please go this way, sir~.”

“Oh, thanks…”

Encouraged by the staff to a chair near the fitting rooms, Masachika took a seat. Then, resting his elbows on his thighs and pressing his forehead with his hands,

“……”

Masachika somehow sensed that Yuki was lying. Moreover, it felt like she was actively avoiding something she didn’t want him to touch upon.

After all, Mom is…

But even if that’s the case.

What can Masachika do? He still held a certain degree of resentment

towards Yumi, so he didn't really feel like doing anything for her in the first place.

Yuki knew this, which was probably why she didn't say anything, seeking help from Kyotarou instead of Masachika.

That's right… Dad went. There's nothing I can do.

He can't do anything, and he doesn't even want to. Is it really right to question Yuki, prioritizing his own interests, when she clearly doesn't want him to even broach the topic? If Yuki wants to keep what was happening hidden, shouldn't her wishes be respected? What Masachika should do instead is devote himself to ensuring Yuki has a good time…

"…What a shitty excuse."

Muttering this quietly, crushing what he truly felt, Masachika stood up, scratching his disheveled bangs. Moving in front of a nearby mirror, he adjusted his distorted expression, which was full of self-mockery and self-loathing. As always, he tried to cover it up with his usual carefree, silly grin.

"*Haah*… Well, guess it's just how it is."

He let out a small sigh and was about to return to his seat when a revolving wardrobe display next to the cash register caught his eye.

"…Seriously?"

His voice slipped out unintentionally. Then, as if drawn to it, he approached and examined it in his hands. After a glance at the fitting room where Yuki entered… seeing that she hadn't come out yet, he swiftly headed towards the cash register.

On the other hand…

Ahhh~, that was surprising. Saved by my sunglasses… No, maybe he saw through it.

Inside the fitting room, Yuki, unable to handle her brother's unexpected attack, twisted her lips in bitterness. Masachika's speculation was correct. Ever since the sports festival, Yumi had been increasingly absent-minded during the day, severely lacking in concentration. Even from Yuki's perspective, she thought it might be better for her to see a doctor. However, Yumi herself was unaware of

this and insisted that she was just lost in thought. It was tricky.

Even I… don't want to think that Mom is sick, but…

Still, watching Yumi lately filled her chest with anxiety. But she couldn't pour out that anxiety on Masachika. If she did, Masachika would surely worry, sinking into self-loathing and regret.

For Nii-sama… I want him to keep smiling.

That was Yuki's wish. The unchanged foundation of Yuki's current self.

"*Haaah…*"

She let out a small breath, unheard from the outside, and decided to change her clothes for now. Since she entered the fitting room under the pretense of trying on new clothes, she couldn't linger forever.

Taking off her hat and sunglasses, she removed her top, shirt, and pants. In the mirror reflected a body that was overall small, slender, and thin. Fortunately, her chest and buttocks had developed normally, so it wasn't exactly a frail figure. But even so, after taking off her clothes, the impression of being slim couldn't be erased.

Looking at my family members, genetically speaking, I should have grown bigger… Maybe it's because I was bedridden when I was little.

It was not like she had a complex about her body shape. But looking at this body that didn't seem to grow no matter how much time passed, she felt sorry for her family worrying about it. Especially her mom, who was always concerned about her body as a parent.

"……"

With a resentful expression, Yuki gently touched her thin lower abdomen.

Hurry up already… I want to become an adult.

Quickly, to reassure her family.

A wish she had been wishing for for a long time. But this body, as if mocking those feelings, refused to grow up. And the heart bound by such a body remained, part of it still innocent like a child.

However, she had no adolescence-specific aversion or embarrassment

towards her relatives. She had never even harbored any romantic feelings towards the opposite sex. In fact, she has never even been aware of any sexual desires.

"……"

She gritted her teeth and impulsively tried to punch her lower abdomen… but just before doing so, she held back, lowering her fist.

"*Suu… fhuu…*"

Taking a deep breath, she suppressed the waves that crashed in her heart. No matter how much she resented herself, her inherent traits wouldn't change. This body, this heart, the reality of being Masachika's sister—none of it would ever change.

"……"

Facing the harsh reality, she pressed her forehead firmly against the mirror. And while glaring at her own reflection, she muttered.

"It's okay… I am… I'm okay…"

She closed her eyes tightly, composing herself. She didn't want to worry her brother. She had to be the usual silly little sister, always smiling.

"*Fhuu…*"

Exhaling deeply, she lifted the corners of her mouth, and in a soft voice, she murmured a magical phrase.

"(Sister mode, activate ♡)"

The uttered words reached her brain through her ears, and her consciousness switched with a click. A mischievous, defiant smile naturally appeared on her cheeks, and she stopped caring about the little things.

"*Hm*, alright."

Satisfied with her reflected expression in the mirror, Yuki nodded, changed into the light blue dress she brought, and arranged her hair in a sophisticated manner.

"*Hehe…* I'm so adorable like this."

Then, after flashing a mischievous smile in front of the mirror, Yuki energetically burst out of the fitting room.

“*Ta-da!* How about this?”

Responding with his usual smile, Masachika said, “That’s nice; it’s like you’re part of a school play.”

“*Hahaha*, then I’ll steal the show.”

“Steal the show!?”

As if both of them had wished for it, the siblings spent their usual enjoyable time together.

⋆･☆･⋆

“Seriously, how troublesome… Getting notified just a week before.”

On the other hand, it was Sayaka who was venting her frustration at a different large commercial facility, separate from where Masachika and Yuki were. Nonoa was nearby, and a bit farther away, Takeshi and Hikaru seemed somewhat uncomfortable.

They were all invited to Alisa's birthday party as friends who formed a band together during the school festival. However, due to Takeshi's half-truth plea for help, asking for advice on "gifts for girls,"

the four of them were out shopping together. Of course, Takeshi's intention to spend the holiday with Sayaka was understood, and Hikaru and Nonoa were aware of it. However, Nonoa, who was not the type to actively assist due to understanding the situation, and Sayaka, who was oblivious, resulted in…

"Well, there's preparation on our end too… Without knowing Alisa's preferences, we can't prepare a satisfactory present."

"Well, yeah."

Muttering complaints, Sayaka and Nonoa, who casually responded with vague agreement, were naturally on the women's floor.

Of course, except for Takeshi and Hikaru, there were other male customers, mostly with their girlfriends. The two guys, unable to intrude into Sayaka and Nonoa's conversation, felt somewhat out of place.

"Well, there's no use complaining… This color would go well with any outfit, and it's just right."

"Yeah, yeah. Let's maybe not go for the 140,000 yen bag, Alisa would definitely freak out."

Casually commenting on an impractical bag for high schoolers that the heiress of Taniyama Heavy Industries had eyed out, Nonoa casually walked over to where Takeshi and Hikaru were.

"Sorry about this, shopping with Sayacchi always takes so long."

"No, it's fine…"

"Yeah… Well, many girls are like that, I guess."

"Yeah, right~? But isn't it boring?"

"No, well, Sayaka seems to be enjoying herself…"

Seeing Sayaka, who looked like she was enjoying herself despite having a stern expression, Takeshi chuckled softly. Looking at his face, Nonoa tilted her head slightly.

“Isn’t it nice to see someone you like having fun? Just watching their various expressions makes you happy, right?”

“Well, uh, yeah… Even though Sayaka isn’t even smiling…”

Takeshi said so somewhat embarrassedly, scratching his cheek. In response, Nonoa raised one eyebrow.

“Really? If it were me, I’d want to see various expressions of the person I like.”

Takeshi, slightly squinting his eyes, nodded as if he understood after a moment.

“I-I see… It’s because you want the person you like to show you all their expressions, including crying and angry faces… That’s mature…”

“It sounds entirely different when Nonoa-san says it, doesn’t it…?”

Deeply impressed, Takeshi and Hikaru nodded. Without replying, Nonoa observed Sayaka, who was interacting with a store clerk.

Yes, I want to see their various expressions…

The meaning of Nonoa’s gaze. What they fundamentally misunderstood. Takeshi and Hikaru had yet to realize.

[1]: A Japanese fish-shaped cake commonly filled with red bean paste.

[2]: A bit of context: as mentioned before in previous volumes, they’re referring to the

“straight man and funny man” (tsukkomi and boke) routine in which the funny man plays the role of being silly and having weird or outlandish jokes or observations, with the straight man correcting them with logical retorts. As such, it is common to view the straight man in a positive light while the funny man is often viewed in a negative sense.

However, in this scenario, Yuki insists that she’s playing the funny man role in a “good way”

as she refuses to be considered the straight man despite giving a retort, as in virtually all of her comedic routines with Masachika, it is Masachika playing the role of the straight man.

[3]: A Japanese flour based pastry.

“Come to think of it, this is like your first time here, isn’t it…?”

During lunch break, Masachika, who received a text summoning him, pushed open the door at the end of the second-floor corridor of the building that hosted various club rooms, leading to an emergency outdoor stairwell. The oddly heavy metal door made a creaking sound as it opened, and the slightly chilly autumn wind blew directly in his face.

Squinting slightly against the wind, Masachika went outside and heard a relaxed voice from the landing that led to the first floor.

“Oh, you came. *Yooo*～”

“Oh… *Yo*～*?* ”

Responding to the unclear greeting for the time being, Masachika descended the stairs.

“Sorry I kept you waiting… Anyway, why here?”

Looking at Nonoa, the one who called him, Masachika asked. The metal emergency staircase had too much airflow, making it a bit chilly considering the current season. In response to Masachika, who subtly hinted that they could talk in some vacant classroom instead, Nonoa raised an eyebrow.

“Why here…? Well, if someone comes here, we can hear them coming right away, you know?”

Saying that, Nonoa moved her gaze upward and paused for a moment before casting a sidelong glance at Masachika.

“Besides, I thought about being considerate to you～? If someone were to see us in an empty classroom or something, it would be more troublesome for Kuzecchi, wouldn’t it?”

In response to the question that could be interpreted in various ways, Masachika unintentionally found himself at a loss for words. If

you think about it straightforwardly, it probably meant, “Isn’t it better here because if someone came, we’d hear it right away?” However, there was another potential interpretation from Masachika’s perspective:

“Wouldn’t it be inconvenient if Alya or Masha found out that we were together in an empty classroom?” It could be taken either way.

Well, either way, digging deeper won’t lead to anything good.

Making that judgment, Masachika immediately regained his composure and simply shrugged his shoulders.

“And? What’s the talk about?”

As if probing right into the matter (?), Masachika, with renewed caution, questioned again. Nonoa turned around, leaning on the railing, casting her gaze far away.

Then, after a few seconds, she vaguely spoke without looking at Masachika.

“Nah~ …It’s not like anything happened, really…”

“?”

Masachika furrowed his brow at Nonoa’s attitude, which was unusual for her straightforward self. He somewhat unconsciously stood next to Nonoa and looked towards the schoolyard in the same way. After a while, Nonoa continued casually.

“So, remember before~? You said you’d hear me out, so I thought, well, I might as well have you listen.”

“…Ah.”

Thinking for a moment, realizing she was talking about when they went to the amusement park, Masachika nodded. Simultaneously, wary of what he might be forced to do, Masachika received Nonoa’s straightforward statement.

“It’s not like I want you to say anything specific… but can you just listen?”

With words that were truly unlike Nonoa, Masachika gazed intently at her profile. Her profile, staring into the distance, seemed

oddly fragile and carried a sense of melancholy that made the overly cautious Masachika feel uneasy.

“…Well, I did make that promise. I’ll listen to what you have to say.”

“Thanks.”

Receiving a straightforward thanks, Masachika felt his composure slipping away.

Hmm? *Could it be that she really just wants me to listen to what she wants to say?*

Still not able to completely dismiss his suspicion, Masachika scratched his head repeatedly, twisting his neck. Nonoa, however, began to talk without seeming to mind his demeanor.

“So, yesterday~ To buy a birthday present for Alisa, I went shopping with Sayacchi, Takeshi, and Hikarun.”

“…So I’ve heard.”

He knew about it as he was also invited, but he had declined, opting to go with Yuki instead.

“And then, while we were eating~, Sayacchi and Takeshi started getting excited about something related to anime.”

“Heh?”

“He probably saw the gachapon[1] machine Sayacchi used at the amusement park and watched the anime relating to it.”

“I see.”

Masachika wondered how Takeshi who, to his knowledge, didn’t watch much anime, was able to engage in otaku talk with Sayaka. He was apparently putting an earnest effort.

Trying to understand what the person you like likes. It was a method anyone could think of, but how many could actually put it into action?

Impressive, Takeshi… I can really admire that.

With genuine admiration for his friend, Masachika sensed the main point of the conversation.

“So, seeing the two of them getting excited about something you didn’t understand, did you feel left out?”

“*Hm~?* ”

Nonoa surprisingly shook her head in response to Masachika's speculation.

"No, it wasn't really about that~"

"? I see."

"Yeah."

Nonoa's side profile nodded easily, seemingly not bothered by anything. Masachika tilted his head. Then, Nonoa's following words deepened Masachika's confusion.

"Them talking together was fine, but… while those two were talking, I got a message from Mama."

"??"

"So, I quickly took out my phone to check the message…"

There, Nonoa narrowed her eyes slightly. Then, with a somewhat melancholic expression, she said.

"Sayacchi didn't get mad, you know."

"…?"

"Usually, if I take out my phone when we're eating, she'd scold me… But Sayacchi and Takeshi were so into their conversation about anime I thought, 'Ah, I'm not a priority for Sayacchi right now.' And then, well…"

After explaining that, Nonoa fell silent. Masachika couldn't find the right words to say as he continued to look at her profile.

What… is this? Is this seriously turning into some counseling session?

Since the incident of being approached (?) by Nonoa at the amusement park, he felt more cautious about her than usual, especially during times when he found himself alone with her.

However, what she was talking about had nothing to do with that.

It was a worry typical high school students held. Her expression carried an inexplicable sense of dissatisfaction, confusion, and loneliness.

Feeling a mix of guilt and pity, Masachika furrowed his brow.

"…Well—"

"Ah, you don't have to say anything. Like I said before, I just wanted you to listen to my story."

Interrupting Masachika's words, Nonoa separated herself from the handrail. Then, she stretched lightly, widening her shoulders as she spoke.

"*Nnn…!* You must find it hard to answer me anyway, right? It kinda feels like, 'Does it matter?'"

Nonoa says, as if pushing herself away. However, Masachika couldn't just let it go.

Masachika now felt ashamed and regretful. He had doubted Nonoa's intentions towards Takeshi and remained cautious of her. She had asked him to listen and he regretted his excessive suspicion.

Really… I might have been slightly biased.

Surely, there were no lies in Nonoa's words. If she intended to do something about Takeshi, she wouldn't have brought this conversation up with Masachika in the first place. If Nonoa decided to do something, she would do it silently, with no attempts at seeking anyone's approval or agreement.

So this time… she probably just genuinely wanted someone to listen to her. Feelings like loneliness and alienation, emotions she hadn't experienced before. Confused and overwhelmed, she reached out to Masachika, seeking support. Yet… Masachika's attitude had been so insincere.

But… what should I say?

Masachika realized that casual empathy or shallow comfort wouldn't resonate with her. Presenting answers with emotions Nonoa herself didn't fully understand would be insensitive and arrogant.

So, what should he do? After much deliberation, Masachika spoke.

"I see… Well, I'll be here to listen whenever you want."

"*Awa*, thanks."

Seeing Nonoa smile faintly, Masachika smiled a little too.

Perhaps, this was the right response after all.

Masachika found that it was common for things to become clearer within himself after talking to others. What Nonoa needed is probably just that, and what Masachika should do is to listen. In doing so, Nonoa will likely find answers to her own emotions.

That's right… It's not like she's a bad person or anything.

This was Masachika's perception, but Nonoa was simply pure and honest with her own heart. However, her purity of doing things her own way without considering others… from the perspective of ordinary people who are social animals, it may seem like deviance.

In this way, in the midst of new relationships, gradually discovering her own emotions… someday, Nonoa might laugh and cry like an ordinary person.

I can't really imagine it though~

Imagining that scene, and while awkwardly smiling at the mismatch, Masachika asked Nonoa another question.

"So, is that all? If there's anything else, I'll listen."

"Well, for now, that's it. I feel much better after talking about it."

"I see, that's good then."

In response to Nonoa's words, Masachika sincerely says. It was somewhat strangely heartening that the girl in front of him, like an

ordinary high school student, was troubled and confided in others.

However,

"As a thank you, you can touch my butt if you want."

In response to the casually delivered words, Masachika froze for a moment, then broke into a strained smile.

"A 250,000 yen rear end? I'll pass, I'm scared of what comes next."

"Really? By the way, today I'm wearing a thong."

“Seriously!?”

“Yeah, look.”

Saying that, Nonoa skillfully lifted her skirt with her right hand.

From the flipped-up skirt, her white skin peeked out. A slender and beautiful thigh that embodied the phrase “beautiful legs.” A round and lovely buttock that was lifted tightly… Just as Masachika caught a glimpse of it, he abruptly shifted his gaze upward.

“Did you see?”

“…I didn’t see.”

He wasn’t talking about her butt but the thong, which can be inferred by the fact that he didn’t see anything.

“Oh, I see. Well, you do prefer breasts over butts, right? Maybe you

would have been happier seeing my bra."

"How do you know about that?"

With a serious expression, Masachika turned his face back, and Nonoa nonchalantly replied.

"Huh? Because you occasionally glance at Alisa's chest."

"Seriously!?"

After responding unconsciously Masachika panicked, thinking,

"Oh no, did I just fall for that trap?" But Nonoa maintained a deadpan expression. An expression so deadpan that Masachika involuntarily realized, "Oh, she's serious."

"…Really? Um, do I actually… look like I do that?"

"It's not like you actively look at her like that… but every time your gaze passes *that* area, it lingers for a moment there."

"Well, come on… but that's unavoidable, right? If you see someone wearing a big gemstone necklace, your eyes naturally linger there, right? It's the same thing…"

"Well, I'm not blaming you or anything."

"It's still unpleasant when you calmly point it out…"

As Masachika slumped his head down, Nonoa lifted her skirt again with her right hand.

"So, what do you think? Wanna touch?"

"No, you see… I'm afraid that we'll get scolded by Sayaka."

"Ah~"

At Masachika's remark, Nonoa looked back upwards, then swiftly let her skirt back down.

As expected, she's weak against Sayaka.

Thinking that, feeling somehow funny and relieved, Masachika smiled a little as he looked at Nonoa.

“You don’t have to do those things, I’ll listen to you anytime…

We’re bandmates, after all.”

“Shouldn’t it be because we’re friends～?”

“Sorry. Honestly, I have some doubts about calling you a friend.”

Whether Masachika could call Nonoa a friend, or if Nonoa recognizes Masachika as a friend, are things that could honestly be questioned. But if she says that now…

“Well… yeah. Sure, we’re friends.”

“Oh～ Then, nice to meet you again～”

“Oh, huh? Ah, nice to meet you?”

They shook hands, exchanging a somewhat inexplicable handshake. Furthermore, the fact that he shook hands with Nonoa out of all people prompted Masachika to don a wry smile.

I never thought I’d have this kind of friendly relationship with someone like Sayaka, but… to think, I’d have this kind of relationship with Nonoa too.

It was something he couldn’t have imagined with his mindset from just a while ago. Nonoa had been perceived as a potentially dangerous individual within Masachika for a long time.

But… through band activities, and from the relationship between Takeshi and Sayaka, Nonoa had been changing. That became clear through today’s conversation. So, thinking that, *Instead of being on guard forever… I should gradually get on good terms with both of them. If Alya wins the election, we’ll be in the same student council next year.*

Reflecting on that in his mind, Masachika finally decided to discard the prejudice he had against Nonoa, which had once been deeply rooted within him.

“Well, it’s about time for me to get going…”

“Yeah, thanks～ I’ll enjoy the breeze a bit more～”

“…I see.”

Her usual, indifferent attitude and expression. And behind it, Masachika sensed that her loneliness and anguish still lingered.

However, without saying anything more, Masachika turned on his heel and ascended the stairs.

“Well, see you later.”

“Yeah～”

Another casual, indifferent response. Yet, the fact that she didn’t make any effort to head back together was probably because… she wanted to be alone.

Should I say something? Is it okay to leave her alone like this?

Such thoughts crossed his mind. However, unable to find the right words or an excuse to stay, Masachika opened the door with a sense of helplessness and left the staircase behind with a slight feeling of powerlessness.

It was because he was so preoccupied with his own thoughts that Masachika didn’t notice.

That there was a figure on his right side, on the stairs connecting the second and third floors. And… Nonoa, who was staring intently at his back, held a cold and mechanical gaze, as if observing a test subject.

⋆･☆･⋆

Wonderful, sympathy is truly amazing～

Watching Masachika’s departing figure, Nonoa thought without much emotion.

Sympathy is wonderful. Once you evoke sympathy, anyone becomes kind. Even those in hostile relationships extend a helping hand, and according to some sources, even the sin of taking a life becomes lighter. How marvelous. There’s no other emotion so convenient and easy.

Even someone like Kuzecchi showed kindness to me, huh～?

She had long understood that Masachika always directed a sense of caution towards her. Understanding that, she had let it be without any inconvenience. Until now.

But… to truly experience raw emotions, caution is a hindrance, isn’t it?

In hindsight, approaching Masachika on the amusement park bench

had been a regrettable move. Thanks to that, Masachika's recently relaxed guard had skyrocketed again.

However, on the other hand… she had learnt that revealing vulnerability would ease Masachika's caution. And in the current interaction, it became evident that this was indeed the case.

Also…

Apparently, Masachika wishes for Nonoa to become more human-like.

Really, how kind of you.

Nonoa shrugged her shoulders at Masachika's overly kind nature.

But if that's the case, she decided that she would, at least in front of Masachika, behave more like a human… behave as if she was in the process of becoming human. Whatever Nonoa decides to do from now on, as long as she strives to become human, Masachika Kuze will never abandon her faint, fleeting hope.

Kind humans are easy to deal with. How convenient~

Thinking such things with an expression that showed little joy, Nonoa, in a casual manner, looked up at the bottom of the landing above her and called out.

"Hey, is someone there?"

In response to Nonoa's loud voice, silence returned. However, as she waited, footsteps eventually descended the stairs. From the gap between the steps, a pair of legs could be seen descending. Strangely, though, there was no sound of footsteps.

And then, after turning around the railing of the stairs, Ayano appeared… It was her. Looking up at Ayano, who appeared emotionless but with a somewhat stiff expression, Nonoa inquired.

"Kishima-chan…? Why are you here?"

"……"

In response to Nonoa's inquiry, Ayano averted her gaze in silence.

It seemed like she was considering how to answer, but Nonoa, without caring, pressed on with her questions.

“Could it be that you were eavesdropping on our conversation?”

A confirmation phrased as a question. Truth be told, Nonoa had noticed Ayano’s arrival shortly after Masachika. To be precise, she only saw her legs, so she couldn’t identify who it was at the time, but judging by the absence of footsteps, she guessed it was Ayano.

In other words, Ayano had intentionally been led astray… but she couldn’t possibly know that. Faced with Nonoa’s accusing gaze, Ayano’s eyes started darting around. After a few seconds of contemplation, she swiftly descended the stairs and bowed deeply towards Nonoa.

“I apologize. I overheard your conversation, and I’m sorry for that.”

As Ayano deeply bowed, Nonoa eased the pressure in her gaze and leaned on the handrail.

“So? Why were you following Kuzecchi?”

“……”

“As someone who was eavesdropped on, I think I have the right to know the reason, don’t I~?”

Ayano, still bowing in silence, slowly opened her mouth after Nonoa played on her guilt.

“Um… during the sports festival, I said something disrespectful to Masachika-sama… I’ve been waiting for an opportunity to apologize, and when I saw the chance…”

“Our conversation started?”

“Yes… I’m truly sorry.”

Observing Ayano closely as she bowed again, Nonoa thought.

“*Hmm*… Did you really do something that’s so hard to apologize for?”

“Well, yes…”

While Ayano affirmed this with her eyes cast down, she didn’t elaborate on the details. However, leaving her be and letting her go was not an option for Nonoa.

As Yuki’s partner, and at the same time an important childhood friend to

Kuzecchi… she might be useful.

Coldly pondering this, Nonoa observed Ayano's expression intently.

Once, Nonoa had asked Sayaka how to move and use people.

Sayaka had answered that moving people involved reason and monetary gain. However, not everyone would move just with that. Because everyone has emotions, and emotions often dominate people's actions beyond reason and monetary gain.

From Sayaka's talk, Nonoa learned that… if you could manipulate emotions, you could control people's actions beyond those two values.

Until now, Nonoa had always adjusted her words and actions based on the other person's reactions, trying to behave in a likable manner. But there was more to it. Rather than changing actions based on the other's emotions, the goal was to manipulate the other person's emotions.

I can't quite read her expression… Maybe her loyalty outweighs her guilt? Let's change the strategy a bit.

Making her judgment, Nonoa crossed her arms and nodded thoughtfully.

"Yeah, yeah, it's true that it's hard to apologize to someone you're usually close with~ I get it, I get it. Sorry if I sounded a bit accusing."

"Ah, no… My circumstances are a separate matter from eavesdropping."

Changing to a surprisingly friendly attitude, Nonoa continued without minding Ayano's confusion.

"Well, I've had similar experiences~. Once, I approached a friend to talk, but just as I was getting closer, they started talking to someone else~. I thought, 'I'll wait a bit until their conversation ends~,' but unexpectedly, a confession played out… It was super awkward. I got caught later, and I got scolded, but in those situations, you never know what to do, right~?"

Self-disclosure and empathy.

Ayano, who had been bewildered and apologetic, blinked repeatedly at Nonoa's unexpectedly affable demeanor. However, without

concern, Nonoa continued with a light laugh.

“Anyway, since we’ve got this connection now, if you want to talk about it, I’m here for you~. Don’t worry, I’m good at keeping secrets. My friends often say that I’m surprisingly good at that, you know?”

Speaking not from self-assessment but based on others’

evaluations.

“No, I… shouldn’t.”

“Don’t hesitate. Kuzecchi also listened to what I had to say.

Consider it as my way of thanking him. It would be tough for Kuzecchi if things were to stay awkward with his important childhood friend.”

And after giving a righteous reason for Ayano to open up,

“And, besides Yuki, aren’t there only a few people who know the exact relationship between Kuzecchi and Kimishima-chan, like me and Sayacchi?”

She limited Ayano’s perspective and narrowed her options.

“Well~ I won’t force you, but if you ever want to talk, I’m here to listen, okay?”

After pressing as much as she could, Nonoa relinquished control in the end.

“……”

As Nonoa closed her mouth, Ayano’s gaze wandered, and slowly, she opened her mouth.

“I would appreciate it if you could keep it confidential…”

Got her.

Without revealing her crooked inner grin, Nonoa prompted the continuation with her gaze.

“In truth, during the sports festival, I made a statement that could be seen as blaming Masachika-sama for deciding to run with Alisa-san…”

“Why?”

“Well… Masachika-sama is Yuki-sama’s…”

Stopping there, Ayano closed her mouth and denied her own statement.

“No. In the first place, I had no right to criticize. If I could have been more of a support to Yuki-sama…”

Nonoa listened and took in the fragmented monologue as if staring into the void.

Hmm *, so in essence, Yuki needed support, but Kuzecchi prioritized Alisa over her?*

Anticipating this, Nonoa lowered her eyebrows with a concerned expression.

“I see… it’s tough when you can’t be of help to someone important to you.”

“Yes…”

“I couldn’t be of much help to Sayacchi during the election campaign in junior high either… I understand the feeling.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah.”

Nodding in response to Ayano’s upward glance, Nonoa continued.

“In the end, Sayacchi lost to Yuki in the election. I wonder if things would have been different if I had done better… Oh well.”

Silence followed.

“……”

Feeling Ayano’s gaze on her cheek, Nonoa looked up at the sky as she spoke.

“Sayacchi cried a lot, saying she had betrayed her dad’s expectations~. Seeing Sayacchi like that, I…”

Recalling her emotions from that time, Nonoa closed her mouth.

Then, turning towards Ayano, she spoke with a poignant smile.

“My heart trembled and ached. But you know what? I realized at that moment… that those who are truly important to you just need you to be there for them, to be on their side. Just by doing that, you can become a real source of support for them. So…”

Gently grasping Ayano’s right hand with both of hers, Nonoa continued.

“Kimishima-chan, I think it’ll be enough if you just continue being Yuki’s ally. By doing just that, I’m sure Yuki will find solace.”

“……”

In response to Nonoa’s words, Ayano averted her gaze, and somewhere in her expression, a pained voice escaped.

“But I…”

“*Hm?* ”

“But… I might not be able to be Yuki-sama’s complete ally.”

Conviction settled in Nonoa as she felt the overflow of Ayano’s true feelings.

Heeeh~?

Hiding her deeply intrigued smile behind a concerned expression, Nonoa inquired.

“Why’s that?”

“……”

“It’s okay, I swear to God I won’t tell anyone.”

In response to Nonoa’s overly dramatic pledge, Ayano spoke at a slow pace.

“I… wish for Masachika-sama to return to the Suou family.”

What spilled from Ayano’s lips was her desire. A desire never shared with Masachika or Yuki.

“I want us to go back to the way we were, the three of us… back to

how we enjoyed our happy daily lives."

Those childhood days, where Yuki innocently admired her brother, where Masachika harbored no guilt about being a brother…

Watching those two, Ayano was always so happy.

"But this is something that goes against both their wills. Nothing more than my selfish hope."

Lowering her eyes, Ayano's voice trembled. Nonoa, feeling Ayano's vulnerability, hugged her tightly. Startled by the sudden embrace, Ayano stiffened. In a hushed tone, Nonoa whispered.

"I see… you've been carrying that feeling all alone for a long time… It must have been tough."

For about ten seconds, Nonoa continued to embrace Ayano tightly. She then pulled back, grabbing Ayano's shoulders and declaring.

"All right, I've decided! I'll support you, Kimishima-chan!"

"Eh?"

"Well, you know how Sayacchi wants Kuzecchi and Yuki to get along, right? Moreover, after hearing such a sincere wish, how could I not support you?"

With a slightly mischievous smile, Nonoa continued.

"Besides, I'm sure Kuzecchi himself thinks he needs to face his family properly. Yeah, I think so too."

"I-Is that so?"

She, of course, didn't know if that was true. She just said it because she knew it would seem convenient for Ayano.

"Yeah, I'm sure. So, I'll help. Oh, by the way, can I call you Ayanono?"

"Eh, umm, yes."

Despite the confusion in her gaze, Ayano nodded. Seeing that, Nonoa deepened her smile.

On that day when she became aware of the gap between herself and the world, Nonoa felt like she could begin to understand a bit of what

those mischievous kids throwing stones at frogs must have felt.

They probably didn't want to genuinely harm the frog.

They just enjoyed the feeling of taboo and the thrill it brought.

Yeah… I get it now.

She recognized that it was wrong. She might get scolded. Nothing might happen at all. But ripples created by the thrown stone might unexpectedly shake things up. Perhaps there was no purpose or reason behind this action.

Even so, she threw the stone.

It's getting fun ♡

Once again enveloping Ayano's hand with both of hers, Nonoa flashed a beautiful smile.

"Nice to meet you again, Ayanono. Well then, let's quickly figure out how to apologize to Kuzecchi."

Such pure words, yet accompanied with pure malice, dripped from her lips.

⋆·☆·⋆

"Now, today's homeroom ends here. Daily duty, dismissed."

"Stand, bow."

"""""Thank you very much～"""""

After school, as Masachika gathered his belongings and stood up, he called out to Alisa next to him.

"Sorry, Alya, I have something to take care of. I'll be a bit late to the student council."

"Is that so? By the way… were you using your smartphone during class again?"

As Masachika lifted his smartphone casually, Alisa shot him a reproachful look. At the disapproving words from the seemingly exemplary Alisa, Masachika shrugged his shoulders.

“I wasn’t playing games. Is it such a big deal if I use it to communicate? Besides, you’re the only one who diligently turns their phone off during class.”

“Just following the school rules.”

“Well, you’re right. But hey… cut me some slack.”

Shrugging his shoulders once again, Masachika quickly left the classroom. Alisa watched his retreating figure with a slightly disapproving look, then let out a small sigh.

Really, he never seems to have the awareness of being a student council member… But, it’s not good to nag too much. It’ll be a problem if he starts to dislike me.

Unconsciously twirling her hair with her fingers, Alisa thought about such things… before suddenly realizing her thinking had taken a girlish turn.

No, no, no. Can’t let that happen… It’s been happening since the other day when I let my guard down.

Checking her surroundings to ensure no one saw her, Alisa sighed lightly while wearing a composed expression.

After a few hours of being dormant, her smartphone, after searching for a signal for a few seconds, vibrated and signaled an incoming message.

? Is it Mom?

Raising her eyebrows slightly, Alisa opened the messaging app to confirm the sender, feeling a sense of surprise.

“Nonoa-san?”

A little puzzled, Alisa checked the message from Nonoa.

And after a few seconds, Alisa messaged the other members of the student council that she and Masachika would be a little late, before standing up with her bag.

⋆･☆･⋆

Here I am, called to an unusual place again…

Ascending the stairs as per Ayano's message, Masachika muttered to himself inwardly. The location was the staircase leading to the rooftop

of the club building. It was where Masachika had talked to Maria during the school festival.

"…Yo."

Seeing Ayano standing in front of the door to the rooftop, Masachika raised one hand lightly. The exchange when they last parted ways was a bit awkward, making this greeting a bit more hesitant than usual. Ayano's expression, seemingly emotionless, appeared a bit stiffer than usual.

"I apologize for summoning you, Masachika-sama."

"Well, that's fine… What's up?"

"Yes. First of all…"

Before Ayano could finish her preface, she attempted to kneel on the spot. Masachika quickly sprinted up the stairs and grabbed her shoulder, stopping her.

"Hey, don't casually kneel like that. Your uniform and hair will get dirty."

"? Isn't that part of the point?"

"Geez, don't give me that straightforward gaze that questions common sense… Just to confirm, you mean conveying sincerity to the point of getting dirty, right? Not in a masochistic sense?"

"Of course, the former. I am not a masochist."

"Yeah, sure…"

"I don't derive pleasure from pain. I just have a desire to be treated roughly like an object."

"You're not hiding that desire. You're just openly stating it at this point. Also, the rest of the world calls that masochism."

"Oh, is that so!?"

With an expressionless face, Ayano widened her eyes, and thunderbolt effects appeared behind her. Taking advantage of her

stiffened state, Masachika grabbed both of Ayano's arms, forcibly lifting her up, and asked again.

"So, what's the matter? Skip the kneeling and tell me briefly."

"Ah, yes…"

Commanded in a resolute tone, Ayano twitched and then lowered her head.

"Firstly, regarding the sports festival… I apologize. As a servant, what I said was out of line."

"……"

The apology was as expected for Masachika. Therefore… he had already prepared a response in advance

"No need to apologize. What you said is valid. Given your position, such criticism is only natural… Above all, it was a statement made with Yuki in mind. Rather than that…"

Lifting Ayano's head and staring directly into her eyes, Masachika deeply bowed.

"Sorry. I shouldn't have put you in the position to say such things in the first place. I truly apologize."

"Masachika-sama, please raise your head."

As Ayano's voice, filled with panic, conveyed her flustered state, Masachika raised his face and smiled sadly.

"You have nothing to apologize for. After all… I asked you to be Yuki's greatest ally," Masachika expressed, recalling the wish he entrusted to Ayano on the night after the first day of the school festival.

"So… thank you. For being Yuki's ally more than anyone else,"

saying this, Masachika once again lowered his head to Ayano. Surprised by this, Ayano softened the atmosphere with a slight smile.

"You're too kind with your words, Masachika-sama," she said, offering a faint smile. Masachika returned the smile. And after exchanging silent smiles for a moment, Ayano changed her expression and asked Masachika.

“Masachika-sama… have your feelings towards Yuki-sama remained unchanged?”

“Yuki is my most dearest, more than anyone else. That has never wavered.”

Upon the assertive declaration, Ayano closed her eyes for a moment, nodded slowly, and then answered with a determined gaze.

“In that case, I have no hesitation. I will continue to think of Yuki-sama first and act accordingly.”

“…Yeah, please do that.”

Confirming their feelings, firm in their resolve, the two locked eyes. Below them, on the landing of the staircase leading to where Masachika and Ayano were, Alisa stood frozen. In her mind, the words Masachika had said to Ayano echoed and replayed.

Most dearest… more than anyone else…

The staircase suddenly felt terribly unreliable. The railings turned to mush, making them unusable.

Ah, ugh, aaahhh!

She wanted to scream. She wanted to vomit. Everything inside her chest. She wanted to spit it all out and stop breathing.

“*Ugh! Ghh!* ”

She held back that impulse with the little reason that remained.

Alisa crumbled down the stairs as if collapsing.

She just wanted to distance herself from that place, going down, down the stairs. When she reached the first floor, someone called out to her from the side.

“Oh, Alisa, thanks for coming~… But why did you come downstairs? Our meeting spot is upstairs…”

Raising her face at the soft voice, she saw Nonoa looking up with a puzzled expression. Although there was something to discuss, Alisa, in her current state, didn’t have the mental space to engage with Nonoa.

“I’m sorry… Can we postpone our business for another time?”

“Eh? Well, okay… but what’s wrong? Did something happen?”

“I’m sorry.”

With just those words, Alisa tried to pass by Nonoa with unsteady steps. But…

“Wait, hold on!”

Her arm was grabbed from the side, forcefully stopping her steps.

Looking over, she saw Nonoa, unusually serious, gazing at her.

“I can’t just leave you alone looking like that. What happened?”

In an instant, Alisa impulsively shook off Nonoa’s hand and seemed about to run away. However, she managed to stop just in time, took a deep breath with trembling lungs, and then spoke.

“…I can’t say what happened.”

Because it would reveal her hidden feelings.

“But… could you stay with me for a bit?”

She wanted someone by her side, someone to watch over her. If she stayed alone, she felt like she might do something unthinkable. In response to Alisa’s wish, containing such expectations, Nonoa readily nodded.

“Yeah, sure～”

“Thank you.”

“No problem at all. We’re friends, right?”

Nonoa said that nonchalantly and released Alisa’s arm, patting her shoulder. Alisa chuckled softly at Nonoa’s usual carefree attitude, not realizing that behind her bright and friendly demeanor, Nonoa’s face was completely expressionless.

[1]: Vending machines that dispense capsule toys of characters (from anime, video games, etc…). “Gacha” as in it is literally a physical gacha, or rather the term gacha was derived from the word “gachapon.”

Chapter 4 - Exposed[1]

Ding-dong-dang-dong…

Alisa heard the chime signaling the end of cleaning time as she laid on the bed in the infirmary.

“If you’re feeling unwell, why not just rest on the infirmary bed?”

Nonoa had said that, half-forcing Alisa to the infirmary. Even when it was time for the student council meeting to begin, Alisa couldn’t muster the strength to get out of the bed.

Is this how it feels to slack off…?

If that were the case, it would be a first in her life. She vaguely thought about it, self-mockingly, in the back of her mind.

Skipping school and slacking off was absolutely unforgivable.

Unthinkable. A stain on her life. And despite thinking so, she couldn’t find the energy to sit up.

The emotions in her heart were heavy and oppressive, leaving no room for contempt of her own actions. The words Masachika spoke from above the stairs kept replaying in her mind. She wanted to believe she had misheard them.

But Masachika playing the piano during the school festival, and the gaze he directed at Yuki during the sports festival… It all came together to create an amalgamation that prohibited Alisa from escaping reality.

Ah, maybe those two…

Had long been in love, torn apart by family circumstances. Yuki, being the daughter of a prestigious family, and Masachika, someone from a middle-class background. Maybe their differing social statuses prevented them from openly dating, even if they had mutual feelings.

That would explain Masachika’s expression towards Yuki’s mother during the sports festival.

Has Masachika-kun been hiding something like that…?

If that were the case, it would be ridiculous. There was never a chance for Alisa to intervene between those two. Masachika’s feelings towards Alisa were merely that of respect and affection one person had for another… not one of romantic interest.

Yet, she went and fell for him on her own, she got excited on her own, and now… was grieving on her own.

“*Gh!* ”

Her chest trembled, and Alisa unintentionally felt like sobbing but forcefully swallowed her breath.

She couldn’t cry. Nonoa was still on the other side of the curtain.

She didn’t want to show anyone this weak, pathetic side of herself, mourning over an unrequited love.

That’s right, what’s the big deal about a little heartbreak? It’s a relief that it’s shallow since I realized it early on.

She became aware of her feelings of love and quickly learned that love was unattainable. Crying over such a thing, feeling sad over such a petty matter, seemed ridiculous to her.

“*Uuuu, hic, ugh.* ”

Wrapping herself in the sheets, she suppressed her welling sobs by burying her face in the pillow. Yet, uncontrollably, words overflowed from her trembling chest.

【No, I don’t want it to end like this…】

With her last bit of pride, she tried to keep it a secret from anyone. To ensure her voice wouldn’t tremble, she whispered quietly.

【I love… I love you…】

Her heart overflowed, and she wasn’t able to stop her words.

What does it matter? What does it matter if her wound was shallow? It’s already too late. He had already, helplessly, stolen her heart. She couldn’t imagine a future with anyone other than Masachika Kuze. Just the thought of Masachika not being by her side made her chest feel like it was about to collapse.

【I love you…】

⋆･☆･⋆

“Thank you very much, Miyamae-sama. Thanks to you, I was able to apologize properly to Masachika-sama.”

“I see. That’s good to hear. And you can call me Nonoa by the way. No need for the whole ‘sama’ stuff.”

“Then… Nonoa-san, thank you very much.”

“No problem, feel free to come to me anytime for advice.”

While exchanging messages with Ayano, Nonoa heard Alisa’s voice faintly leaking through the curtain.

Ugh … *as expected, the types who suppress their emotions are kinda boring.*

Hearing Alisa’s voice that was tightly holding back her emotions, Nonoa couldn’t grasp what was going on inside her.

What Nonoa desired was a pure, intense, and unbridled explosion of emotions. She wanted to see a powerful eruption of emotions that would shake her unmoving heart. However, she knew from experience that the explosion of ordinary emotions wouldn’t make her heart tremble. So, she thought, why not try with Alisa, someone she had some degree of friendship with, even if not as much as with Sayaka…

Well, my main target is Kuzecchi anyway. Gotta throw a few stones, even if it’s boring.

Setting the stage was essential. For that purpose…

Now then, let’s get to the finishing touches.

Taking advantage of Alisa’s vulnerable state with basic mind control. Just as Nonoa was about to draw closer and narrow the distance with Alisa—

Buzz

Her phone, held in her hand, signaled an incoming message.

“Nonoa-san, still cleaning?”

The sender was Hikaru. Seeing the message, Nonoa remembered today was a day for band practice in the light music club.

Ugh … *maybe I’ll skip today.*

Looking towards the bed, she was about to reply when her phone vibrated again.

“Aren’t you coming to the light music clubroom today?”

The sender of the next message was Sayaka. The moment Nonoa recognized the name, she tightly gripped her phone with both hands and swiftly typed out a message.

“I’m going, okay? You coming too?”

“Just for a bit.”

“Got it. I’ll be there soon～”

Ending with a flurry of heart-shaped stickers, Nonoa pocketed her phone and called out through the curtain.

“Alisa～? I’m heading to the light music club, okay?”

There was no response to her call. However, without minding, Nonoa, pretending to be a considerate friend, intentionally made some noise as she left the infirmary.

Alright, let’s go at full speed～♪

With that, Nonoa immediately headed for the music room, briskly running through the corridor. In her mind, thoughts of Ayano and Alisa had already completely disappeared.

⋆･☆･⋆

“Well then, good work, everyone～”

“Yeah, good work～”

“Good work～”

“Thanks for your hard work.”

Having finished his student council duties, Masachika left the student council room. Frowning, he looked outside into the now dark hallway.

Alya didn’t show up in the end…

A message had been sent to the student council group chat saying she would be a little late, but that was it. Maria couldn’t reach her by phone either. Various post-sports festival tasks kept them busy, and they had anticipated it would be a hectic day.

It was hard to imagine Alisa neglecting her duties, so the other members of the student council were more worried than upset. And as for Masachika…

Come to think of it, I haven't really talked with Alya much since the sports festival.

Due to various family matters, he didn't have the luxury to worry about anything else, and he thought Alisa might have sensed that and left him alone. However, witnessing her unexplained absence from the student council today suggests there was more to it than he thought.

Masha said she'd call her again… I guess I'll search a bit myself.

With that in mind, before going home, Masachika decided to check places that he suspected Alisa might be.

"She's not here, huh…?"

After passing through various classrooms and even the staff room, Masachika peeked into the second music room, muttering to himself in the hallway.

It would be hilarious if she's already gone home, but…

He knew that was not possible. And knowing that only increased his worry.

Well, for now, let's check the classroom again.

Turning on his heel, Masachika encountered someone unexpected.

"Oh, if it isn't Kuze."

The one who addressed him with a theatrical tone was Yusho Kiryuin, the piano club president. A month ago, during the school festival, he masterminded a commotion involving the entire school, ended up with a buzz cut as a punishment by his cousin Sumire, and received a one-month suspension. Seeing the person with whom he clashed fiercely during the school festival, Masachika instinctively frowned.

Masachika never liked the narcissistic and self-centered Yusho, and during the school festival, they created various dark memories together. Moreover, he was currently worried about Alisa.

"Yeah, see ya."

Masachika glanced in his direction briefly, swiftly passing by.

However,

“Wait a moment.”

Yusho quickly maneuvered in front of Masachika, inexplicably leaning against the wall and casting a seemingly unnecessary sidelong glance. The overly theatrical attitude made Masachika want to comment if he’s read too much shoujo manga or romance dramas. Despite his irritation, Masachika managed to suppress it and said,

“Hey… We don’t exactly have the kind of relationship where we talk normally, right? …What do you want?”

“*Hmm?* It’s not like it’s a big deal.”

“I’ll hit you with all my might, spotted baldy.”

At that merciless term, Yusho’s cheek twitched slightly.

Unfortunately, or perhaps sadly, he seemed to realize that Masachika’s comment had hit the mark, and his reaction turned into one of laughter rather than anger.

After all, Yusho, who had been given a buzz cut by Sumire, had regrown some of his hair during his suspension, but the parts where his scalp was still visible were slow to heal. The state of his hair being thin and patchy was indeed something that would belong to a “spotted baldy.”

Resisting the urge to laugh at that accurate description, Yusho stretched out both arms dramatically, shrugging his shoulders.

“Well, well, making fun of someone’s physical characteristics…

this is why commoners are—”

“I’ve never heard someone who looks like that call me a commoner before.”

Of course, Masachika wouldn’t sarcastically comment on someone born with certain features due to illnesses or accidents beyond one’s control. However, Yusho brought this upon himself. As someone currently irritated by the ongoing situation, Masachika felt compelled to say something like this.

Or rather, despite calling me a commoner… does he not realize that Yuki and I are siblings?

Suddenly considering that, Masachika reevaluated his thoughts.

No matter how similar their last names might be, it would be overwhelmingly rare for someone to leap to the conclusion, “They might be siblings.” Most people would consider it a mere coincidence or at most, only think of them as distant relatives. The one who immediately identified them as siblings, Nonoa, was the abnormal one.

As Masachika pondered these thoughts, Yusho seemed to have regained his composure and casually struck up a conversation as if nothing had happened.

“I didn’t think you’d be here right now after school. I wonder if the rumors about you performing with the Wind Ensemble Club are true?”

“…Who did you hear that from?”

Masachika neither confirmed nor denied his speculation, which only a few people should know. In response, Yusho casually replied,

“I’m the president of the piano club, you know? As the head of another music-related club, rumors like that reach me.”

“I see… But unfortunately, I’m only here to search for someone.

So, well…”

Saying only what was essential, Masachika attempted to pass by Yusho again.

However…

“Is the person you’re searching for Alisa Kujou?”

At the mention of Alisa’s name, Masachika involuntarily stopped in his tracks and glared at Yusho with a mix of suspicion and wariness.

“Don’t make that face. I just happened to see Kujou going into the infirmary with Miyamae.”

“With Nonoa…?”

The name of the person that came to mind just moments ago made

Masachika furrow his brows. Despite this, Yusho's words were undeniably useful information, so reluctantly, he expressed his thanks.

"…Thanks. Well then."

And this time, he tried to cross in front of Yusho. But…

"Well, wait a moment, Kuze. Are you seriously planning to welcome Miyamae into the student council?"

At that suggestive question, Masachika inwardly thought,

"Annoying." He replied, suppressing his irritation.

"…If we get elected, then yeah."

Receiving Masachika's indifferent response, Yusho grinned mockingly.

"Really? Do you seriously intend to bring such a dangerous entity into your own ranks? Willingly? That doesn't sound sane."

In response to Yusho's words, Masachika momentarily stumbled over his words…

That, in itself, was the most significant proof that Masachika, deep down, acknowledged a certain validity in Yusho's argument.

"Do you really think Miyamae would be a reassuring ally? If so, you're making a big mistake."

Yusho, keenly aware of Masachika's thoughts, sharply amplified them.

"Miyamae won't become anyone's ally. For her, people in this world only fall into only two categories: important subjects for observation and subjects that can be destroyed. That's all."

"…Does she seem like a twisted person to you?"

"Doesn't she seem that way to a soft-hearted person like you?"

Sarcastically parried by Yusho's calm response, Masachika's expression turned bitter. Nevertheless, as someone who acknowledged Nonoa as a friend, he couldn't affirm Yusho's words in silence.

Masachika continued to argue.

"Kiryuin… What you know is the Nonoa from before, right? She has

been interacting with various people, experiencing various things, and gradually changing. The Nonoa I know now is different from how she was before”

“Nothing has changed. If there’s anything that’s changed, it’s just how she appears in front of you.”

“You…”

To Yusho, who continued to speak of Nonoa as a malevolent entity, Masachika finally revealed his anger. However, Yusho shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly in response.

“Good grief, you still don’t get it, huh?”

Shaking his head, Yusho distanced himself from the wall and walked past Masachika.

“One last thing. Your biggest weakness is that you can’t help but force yourself to believe in the goodness of others, Kuze.”

Uttering these words as they passed each other, Yusho left.

Masachika found those words thought-provoking, and he couldn’t leave them unchallenged. As Yusho walked away, Masachika threw words at his departing back.

“And your big weakness, Kiryuin, is that you can’t shed that theatrical attitude even with that bald head of yours.”

“*Gh!* ”

As Yusho stumbled forward, Masachika headed towards the infirmary. Even during that time, Yusho’s words continued to swirl in his mind.

Nonoa’s changed appearance… is all just an act?

Ridiculous. There was no need to listen to the words of a villain like Yusho. Nonoa, friend, Yusho, enemy—which one would you believe?

Even thinking that way, such a doubt didn’t disappear.

Somewhere in his mind, Masachika couldn’t deny that he found a sense of merit in Yusho’s arguments. And once that suspicion took root, it extended its tendrils, invading his thoughts.

Alya heading to the infirmary with Nonoa…? Was she feeling unwell? Why

was Nonoa, someone in a different class and club, with Alya? Could it be that she did something to her…?

The intense gaze and words directed at him from Nonoa on the bench at the amusement park after the cultural festival resurfaced in his mind. Whether it was sincere or not remained uncertain, and whether rational thinking applied to someone like Nonoa was also unclear.

But, speaking generally… if a girl notices that her crush, Masachika, is close to another girl, Alisa, would she not harbor animosity towards her as a romantic rival?

If Nonoa is also like that… No, but since then, Nonoa hasn't approached me or anything. Besides, didn't I only just decide to discard my bias against Nonoa!?

Masachika dismissed the thoughts of doubting his friend with shame and self-disgust.

"Your biggest weakness is that you can't help but force yourself to believe in the goodness of others, Kuze."

And yet, Yusho's comment resurfaced in his mind as Masachika swiftly headed towards the infirmary, with the intention of talking to Alisa to completely dispel these suspicions. Or, at the very least, he hoped to do so.

"Excuse me."

Suppressing his restless emotions, Masachika knocked on the sliding door and entered the infirmary. The school nurse, who was sitting in front of the desk, raised her face.

"Oh… Could it be, Kujou-san?"

"Ah, yes. *Um*…"

"Over here. I was just thinking about waking her up soon, so the timing's perfect."

Saying so, the nurse opened the only closed curtain and went inside.

"Kujou-san, how are you feeling? Kuze-kun here's to pick you up, you know?"

Following the school nurse's voice, a hushed conversation could be heard. After a while, she came out with an apologetic expression.

“I’m sorry, Kuze-kun. You came all the way, but… Kujou-san will rest a little more and then leave by herself, so please don’t worry.”

“Eh?”

It was a discreet rejection. Masachika, who hadn’t expected to be refused a face-to-face meeting, was left speechless. However…

Well, but… if the person in question doesn’t want to…

Insisting on his feelings and pressing on would only be a nuisance. Respecting Alisa’s wishes is what a partner should do.

“Ah, then… I’ll call her sister, Maria-san, alright?”

“Yes, that might be a good idea.”

At least, he would call Maria so that Alisa could return home properly. As he took out his smartphone to make the call…

—Are you gonna run away again?

Such a voice echoed in his head. When he involuntarily stopped, the face of Yuki came to his mind. The false smile Yuki had shown him while they went shopping.

“……”

Yet he pretended not to see it during that time. Pretended not to notice. Even though he sensed that Yuki was holding in various painful emotions.

Because it was Yuki’s will, respecting his sister’s will. He made convenient excuses and ran away.

Now, was he about to do the same thing again?

Should I really back down just because Alya’s clearly not in a normal state and rejected my presence? I… made a promise, didn’t I?

The promise he made on the day when he decided to run in the election together with Alisa. To support her by her side. To not choose someone else. That was what Masachika vowed.

“*Gh!* Alya!”

Fueled by a mix of anger towards himself and an indescribable sense

of duty, Masachika exclaimed. Shoving his smartphone back into his pocket, he quickly slipped past the surprised school nurse, ignoring her attempts to stop him, and pulled open the curtain. Disregarding the

school nurse's voice from behind, Masachika stepped into the space behind the curtain.

⋆·☆·⋆

Alisa was dreaming.

In the dream, she was crying on a bed in the infirmary, when Masachika had come to pick her up. He would tell her it was all a misunderstanding, that she was the most important to him. Saying that, he would gently embrace her. What a convenient dream…

"—ou-san, Kujou-san."

Shaken awake, Alisa opened her eyes. What greeted her vision was a pillow faintly illuminated by the light filtering through the white sheets.

"Kujou-san, how are you feeling? Kuze-kun here's to pick you up, you know?"

"!"

At the school nurse's words, Alisa's heart faintly fluttered as she quickly fell silent. She intuitively knew what would happen. Masachika had come to pick her up just like in the dream, yet it was a reality that wouldn't play out the same way.

She knew. It was all a dream. But for now… she didn't want to face reality.

"…I'll go home by myself after resting for a bit. Could you ask him to go back first?"

"Eh… R-Right… Is it okay for you to go home by yourself?"

"Yes."

"Are you okay? Is there anything you need prepared…"

"I'm okay."

With a brief answer, Alisa, as if rejecting any further conversation, tightly wrapped herself in the sheets.

The uncontrollable emotions that had raged in her chest had momentarily subsided while she slept. In their place, a sense of helpless emptiness now filled Alisa's entire body.

Empty. Everything was empty. What she was. What she was doing right now. She couldn't find any meaning in it.

No, there probably was no meaning. All of this was pointless, worthless, as if wrestling with oneself…

"Alya!"

Suddenly hearing her name being called out sharply, Alisa jolted her body. Immediately after, along with the sound of the curtain being drawn, someone—no, Masachika—stood nearby.

"Alya…? What happened?"

"Wa-wait, Kuze-kun! Don't just barge into a sick person's cubicle—"

"Sensei, can you wait a moment? If Alya insists on me leaving, I'll leave right away."

Masachika's words forced the school nurse to swallow their own words. Then, through the sheets, Alisa heard Masachika's caring voice.

"Alya… Are you okay? Can you explain what happened?"

A gentle voice that conveyed genuine concern for her. However, even that sounded hollow to her now.

That kindness… is something that doesn't belong only to me, right…?

Such twisted thoughts surfaced in her mind, only to quickly vanish like bubbles. If it wasn't something exclusive to her, then what was it worth? It seemed trivial. Meaningless. All of these thoughts…

"Don't tell me… could it be that Nonoa did something…?"

"…?"

However, at Masachika's serious tone that reached her ears, a question mark appeared on top of Alisa's head. With that trigger, her numbed brain began to regain its normal function.

“Just now, Kiryuin told me that you and Nonoa were together…”

“…No.”

“Eh?”

Finally responding sensibly, Alisa surprised Masachika with her answer.

“Nonoa-san had nothing to do with it… She just took care of me when I felt unwell.”

“Eh, oh, is that so? Uh, then, it was all my misunderstanding…”

Regret and embarrassment echoed in Masachika’s voice, and as Alisa gently lifted the sheet to peek with one eye, she saw Masachika squatting beside the bed, covering his face with both hands.

“—Jeez, how embarrassing… Damn, I’m ashamed of myself now…”

Faced with this somewhat embarrassing scene, laughter unexpectedly escaped from Alisa’s throat. Then, sensing that Masachika had raised his face with a puzzled expression, she quickly lowered the sheet, blocking her gaze.

Why am I… laughing?

Despite such questioning thoughts, her lips somehow curled up.

Masachika, holding his head in a pathetic manner, was just too amusing for some reason.

“Alya…?”

As Alisa trembled silently under the sheets, Masachika called out to her in a dubious voice. In response, Alisa, with a flat tone, suppressed her emotions and answered.

“It’s nothing… Just heard a bit of unpleasant news.”

“Unpleasant news… Could it be something related to the election campaign?”

Masachika made a misguided guess at Alisa’s vague words. This incorrect assumption left Alisa unsure of how to respond. And as Masachika tried to interpret that silence, his misunderstanding grew.

“Sure, losing in the horseback competition was a setback for us.

But considering that Sumire-senpai and Elena-senpai joined our side as newfound allies, it wasn’t a bad outcome overall. After our continuous success so far, we might still face some criticism for a while, but don’t bother dealing with that kind of stuff—”

Misinterpreting that Alisa was currently bedridden due to being verbally attacked by Yuki’s supporters, Masachika earnestly tried to express himself. Yet it somehow came off as comical.

He truly has no clue…

Who does he think is responsible for making her feel so down?

Thinking like that, Alisa suddenly realized that it had always been like this. Masachika would always act like he understood everything about her… yet he never notices the most crucial things. It was incredibly ludicrous, and Alisa would often find joy in outsmarting Masachika…

Fufu *, really… He truly doesn’t understand anything.*

She was happy he was unaware of her feelings. Yet she resented the fact he was unaware of her feelings.

Under the sheets, while listening to Masachika earnestly speaking, Alisa immersed herself in conflicting emotions. Yet, as Masachika continued to earnestly speak for her sake, a sense of happiness gradually overwhelmed her body.

Even if those words were off the mark, right now, Masachika’s kindness, as he devoted himself to her, was… only for Alisa.

It’s sad that… I’m not your fated partner.

For Alisa, Masachika was her destined partner, yet it didn’t go both ways. It was unbearably sad. It was something so painful that it took her breath away.

But… she can’t give up.

So… let’s bury these feelings for a while.

Masachika was drawn to her, he wanted to support her, because he admired the strong-willed Alisa Kujou. She couldn’t stay in this state, feeling down. Until the day Masachika turns around and notices, Alisa must stand strong. Masachika probably wishes for that too. So…

“—There’s more to it, you know? Even I…”

In an attempt to encourage Alisa, Masachika continued talking.

And as he did so, Alisa, under the sheets, extended her right hand, beckoning him with a slight motion.

“*Hm?* What is it?”

Leaning forward, Masachika cautiously brought his face closer.

Responding to her further beckoning, he leaned even closer to Alisa’s face.

“What…?”

Hearing Masachika’s abrupt voice so close, Alisa abruptly sat up.

She quickly pulled the sheets over the both of them, covering Masachika, who reflexively closed his eyes while supporting himself on the bed.

“*Uwah…!* ”

With both hands on the bed, Masachika closed his eyes reflexively. Alisa, still gripping the sheets, leaned over and embraced his head tightly against her chest.

Then, she gently presses her lips onto Masachika’s unexpectedly soft black hair and whispers softly.

This translates to “I love you.”

Not with words inadvertently leaked as usual, but with heartfelt, overflowing love.

Alisa closed her eyes after confessing her hidden feelings, sinking her love deep into her heart. Slowly releasing her embrace, Masachika lifted his face, and under the pristine white sheet, their gazes entwined.

In a state of confusion from Alisa’s sudden embrace, Masachika’s eyes twitched in discomfort.

“Uh, what’s going on?”

To Masachika, who showed a boyish expression appropriate for his age, Alisa, feeling relieved, provocatively smiled as usual.

“It’s a relief that you’re so dense… Well, I’m fine now.”

Saying this, Alisa abruptly pulled away the sheet, and the fluorescent light in the infirmary poured down brightly. Squinting her eyes unintentionally, she blinked rapidly, and… behind Masachika, she caught a glimpse of the school nurse, wearing a twisted smile.

“Hey, you two… What are you doing in front of a teacher?”

Unable to say anything in response, Alisa, overwhelmed by guilt and awkwardness, unconsciously averted her gaze. The school nurse then let out a big sigh before speaking.

“Well… I couldn’t exactly see what the two of you were doing, so I’ll overlook it this time. Now, if you’re feeling better, go home.”

“Y-Yes… Thank you.”

Prompted, Alisa wore her shoes and stood up with her bag. As she headed toward the door. And as she bowed apologetically, the teacher, with a somewhat lenient gaze, spoke up.

“Just so you know… If you use the infirmary bed for that kind of thing, you’ll be suspended immediately.”

“We won’t do that!”

Hearing Masachika’s vehement denial, Alisa finally realized the meaning of “that kind of thing.”

“N-No! We absolutely won’t do such a thing!!”

As Alisa yelled her retort, the school nurse waved her hand with a lukewarm expression. Despite pouting her lips in irritation, Alisa bowed and left the infirmary. As Masachika followed, closing the sliding door, the hallway lights, sensing the presence of people, started flickering on.

“*Haaah*… Shall we go home, then?”

“…Yes.”

Following Masachika, who seemed somewhat exhausted, Alisa headed towards the entrance. And during this time, the school nurse’s warning echoed in her mind.

“That kind of thing”… between me and Masachika?

Unintentionally imagining such a scene, Alisa’s head heated up, as she grits her teeth tightly.

“—Impossible!!”

“What’s wrong now!?”

Startled by Masachika’s sudden backwards jerk, Alisa avoiding eye

contact due to embarrassment, muttered in Russian.

【That's right… that kind of thing should be done after marriage…

At the very least, after engagement… Because, there's the risk of pregnancy… Besides, I'm practically—】

In anger and shame, Alisa continued to rant with a stern face, her vivid confession leaking out. Right beside her, *Oh, there's a bright star right over there~ Maybe it's Venus~*

How amazing~

In response to Alisa's candid monologue, Masachika gazed into the distant cosmos.

[1]: The kanji used here (露) has multiple meanings: Exposed (verb), Exposure (noun), Russia, and Dew.

Chapter 5 - Chaos

"See you later then."

"Yeah~"

Masachika waved his hand lightly in front of the classroom and parted ways with Alisa.

Haah…

After turning away from Alisa, he inwardly let out a deep sigh.

Yesterday, he had escorted the unwell Alisa to her home just to be sure, as she had been bedridden in the infirmary. However, when they met this morning, Alisa seemed completely back to her usual self. There was no sense of distance, no signs of being down. She had fully returned to her usual state, which Masachika found relieving in itself, but…

I can't keep my composure.

Alisa's soft and warm body when she hugged him. Her confession dropped like a whisper. And… her candid revelations about an intimate life with him in Russian.

No, I tried not to listen, okay? I really did… but it's not like I could physically stop her words from entering my ears!!

For now, Masachika understood very well that Alisa was quite fastidious regarding that topic. Something he didn't want to know but found out anyway.

Well, I do understand that I need to think about the meaning of Alya's confession and all, but honestly, my mind can't focus on that right now…

To make matters worse, Alisa herself seems so nonchalant about it, so Masachika can't help but feel like, "Maybe it's just better to forget all of this already."

The more he thought about it deeply, the more he lost the motivation to ponder.

Well, this might be a form of escapism too, huh…

It was just yesterday when he gained a newfound determination to not run away anymore, prompting him to run in mental circles with grandiose enthusiasm. Then, as he remembered the embarrassment and regret from his misunderstanding back then, Masachika inwardly apologized to Nonoa once again.

No, seriously, I'm sorry. You were just accompanying Alya, and I unfairly doubted you out of prejudice… It's all that darned baldy's fault. Yeah.

Blaming Yusho casually, regrets surfaced once again in Masachika's mind as the student council room came into view.

"*Nnngh.* "

Clearing his throat slightly in front of the door, he straightened his posture and adjusted his expression before knocking three times.

"Excuse me."

Announcing his presence, he opened the door to the student council room, and…

"…What's this?"

Faced with an unexpected sight, Masachika froze, his hand still on the doorknob.

On the long table, paper plates and paper cups were neatly arranged. On them were various Western sweets such as canelés[1] and madeleines, along with many other sweets and drinks. Amidst the scene, what stood out was the Jack-o'-lantern placed confidently on

the center of the table.

“Oh, I’ve been waiting for you, Kuze-ku~n. Trick or treat!”

“It’s already November, you know?”

Masachika retorted his senior, who was most likely the one who prepared all of this, as he squinted at her appearance.

“What’s with that outfit? Illegal Girl-senpai.”

“Yeah, it is I! Sometimes the beautiful president of the Wind Ensemble Club. Sometimes the mysterious Sexy Mask. And now, I am…!

Wait, Illegal Girl?”

“Well, aren’t you at the age where you can’t legally call yourself a magical girl anymore…?”

“Stop with those cold eyes! I came back to my senses like three times while waiting, you know!?”

“That makes it four times now.”

Turning her face away, Illegal Girl-Senpai… or rather, Elena-senpai, used both her hands to create a barrier against Masachika’s gaze.

She was currently dressed in a frilly and sparkly magical girl costume that only seemed suitable for junior high school students to wear.

“Well, it can’t be helped! I asked the Handicraft Club to lend me a witch’s cosplay costume, and this is what they gave me!”

“I kinda doubt that.”

While holding down her skirt which was too short and too wide, Elena swung what seemed like a magic wand with one hand.

I think it would be better if she lost the wand, though… She’s quite serious about stuff like this.

Exhaling lightly, Masachika returned his gaze to the table.

“By the way, is this, perhaps, a post-sports festival party… or something?”

“Y-Yeah, that’s right. Everyone except Touya and Chisaki didn’t

participate in the sports festival committee's party, right? So, I kinda wanted to host one again… in a Halloween-ish way."

It was a casually mentioned statement but it left Masachika speechless. As Elena said, originally, the student council members were invited to the committee's party after the sports festival. However, Yuki

and Ayano declined the invitation due to Yumi's situation, Masachika didn't feel like celebrating at all after the horseback competition, and Alisa, in her own way, considered her partner's feelings and didn't join, and Maria, following her sister's lead, skipped it too… In the end, it was only the president and vice-president who represented the student council at the party.

"Ah, no, I'm not blaming you guys, okay? It would be awkward to act like nothing happened after the horseback competition and have a party right after together~, right?

Interpreting Masachika's silence as confirmation, Elena seemed a bit flustered as she explained. Her follow-up was subtly off the mark, but since he couldn't deny it without explaining the entire situation, Masachika, feeling sorry for making his senior worry, vaguely laughed and changed the subject.

"Oh, so you went through the trouble of preparing a party for us.

Thank you for that."

"No proble~m."

"By the way… is it just you, Elena-senpai? What about the committee chair and vice-chair?"

"Eh? Oh… well, you know… how she's pretty strict with him, so…"

Elena talked about her partner from their student council days with a dismissive pout.

"So she's strict~? You mean in like the 'you shouldn't attend a party with other girls' way? It's not like it's a college drinking party, you know…"

"Yeah, right? It's not like there's alcohol involved, so nothing untoward would happen, right? Well, she's very possessive, and they suit each other, I guess."

After spreading her arms and shrugging her shoulders, Elena pointed at the table.

“But we’ve got treats. See, those pastries on that plate are a treat from her.”

“Oh, I see.”

“It’s from a pretty famous shop~ Since she couldn’t personally thank you guys here for helping around, she at least wanted to buy the snacks.”

“An ideal boss, huh…”

Muttering quietly, Masachika commented on the behavior resembling that of a middle-aged supervisor who covers the bill for the junior team’s drinking party. Then, with a serious face, he said,

“However, I do have some unfortunate news for you.”

“Eh, what?”

“The president and vice-president won’t be coming today.”

“Eh?”

“Additionally, Alya, Yuki, and Ayano will all be arriving late.”

Upon receiving this information from Masachika, Elena tilted her head with a half-smile.

“…Why?”

“Apparently, some members of the Raikokai are visiting today, so the two candidates for president, along with the current president, were summoned. Vice-President Sarashina is away at the Disciplinary Committee today to help. Oh, and Ayano is simply on cleaning duty.”

“The members of the Raikokai…? Why again?”

“Something about financial donations… or rather, gifts? It seems like they’re discussing getting new equipment, like tents, to replace the ones that we used for the sports festival, or something like that.”

“Oh, yeah, they did get quite worn… but…”

Nodding in agreement, Elena, with a forced smile, contorted her

smile.

“Could it be that my effort will go to waste…?”

“Alya and Yuki are just making brief appearances, then they’ll come here right away, it seems.”

In any case, there was no better way to describe it other than bad timing.

I mean, if you’re gonna hold a surprise, you should have at least gathered some information beforehand…

As if reflecting on such a lesson, the two stared at each other with subtle expressions. Then, there was a knock on the door, and when they turned around, they saw Maria entering the student council room.

“Huh? Elena-senpai? Oh, what’s this～?”

Tilting her head at the sight of Elena, Maria, followed by a glance at the table, raised a question mixed with joy and curiosity.

Elena, having regained her composure, explained the situation once again. Maria, looking pleased, sat down in her usual seat, her eyes sparkling at the delicious-looking Western sweets.

“Wow, this looks so delicious… Oh?”

Blinking as she picked up a canelé, Maria brought it to her nose, sniffing.

“Isn’t this made… with alcohol?”

“Ah, well, it’s a canelé, so it has rum in it, doesn’t it?”

“Is that so? *Hmm*, that’s unfortunate, but I can’t eat this～”

“Eh? Why? Don’t like alcohol?”

In response to Masachika’s question, Maria, still holding the canelé, flashed a slightly embarrassed smile.

“It’s not that I don’t like it… I’m just really weak to alcohol. Just the smell of the vodka my grandpa warms up by the fireplace is enough to make me tipsy.”

“Just from the smell? … Oh, I see. Alcohol does evaporate pretty easily. So you get drunk from just its vapors, huh…”

“That’s right~. Oh, but this smells really good… It kinda smells like rum raisins[2]. Rum has a unique sweet scent, right? *Hmm*, it’s a shame I can’t eat it.”

Gazing sadly at the canelé, which displayed a gem-like brown hue, while muttering things like “Maybe if I take only a little” and “*Hmm*, but…”

“I didn’t know Maria-chan was so weak with alcohol… I thought Russians were stronger than the Japanese in that regard.”

“Well, Masha-san is half Japanese, you know? And it’s not like all Russians are necessarily strong with alcohol.”

“True. Ah~, but Alisa-chan seems to be the type that can handle alcohol well~. Just a feeling, though.”

“That's true. I mean, it’s hard to imagine Alya being totally worn out…”

I know, right~? Maria-chan, how is it really with her? Well, Alisa-chan probably hasn’t drunk alcohol before, but…”

While looking at Maria, Elena’s questioning voice slowly decelerated and eventually stopped. Following her gaze, Masachika quickly realized the reason.

“*Hmm?* What’s wrong~?”

Maria’s voice was more airy than usual, stretched and elongated, and her eyes seemed dreamy. Her head, occasionally adorned with flowers and heart marks, seemed to be emitting bubbles… And in her hand remained a perfectly pristine canelé, with not even a single bite.

“She seriously got drunk just from smelling it!?”

As Masachika reacted to the clearly tipsy Maria, she tilted her body and neck, emitting a “*Hmm~?* ” with a voice that resembled someone who just woke up. She then giggled and leaned back against the chair, bringing the canelé to her mouth.

“Wait, don’t eat that!”

Jumping in, Elena snatched the canelé from Maria’s hand.

Holding the paper plate away from Maria, she managed to keep it out of her reach.

Leaning her chest on the table, Maria extended her arms to the maximum, flapping them like wings. Realizing it was out of reach again, this time she reached for the canelé on the adjacent seat, so Masachika hurriedly snatched that away too. In a joint effort with Elena, they shifted the paper plates, and Maria pouted like a child, her arms still outstretched. Then, she grabbed a chocolate box nearby.

“Um, Elena-senpai. I know you arranged this out so nicely, but maybe it’s better if we put this away for now…”

“Y-Yeah, you’re right. We don’t know when Maria-chan might eat them out of the blue…”

“Dwelishus♡”

Maria’s floaty voice echoed throughout the room. Looking in that direction, Masachika saw Maria pick a piece of chocolate from the tray she pulled out of the box and savor it, wearing a blissful smile. And from her head, new soap bubbles continued to pop out. Of course, this was just an imaginative description of her being drunk.

“Ah, those chocolates have liquor in them…”

“You should have said that earlier!”

Inadvertently retorting in casual language to his senpai, Masachika reached out to Maria, who was about to go for the second piece. While he successfully managed to seize the box of chocolates, he unfortunately couldn’t prevent Maria from eating the chocolate she already had in her hand. With the second piece of chocolate already in her mouth, Maria, with her eyes now dreamier, began to sway her body left and right, humming a tune.

“…Eh, isn’t this a bad situation?”

“No matter how you look at it, it’s definitely bad.”

“That’s not what I meant… Wouldn’t this scene cause a misunderstanding if someone walked in?”

Masachika abruptly stopped moving upon hearing Elena’s words, pondering. How would this scene look to outsiders who didn’t know the circumstances?

“Student council member at the prestigious Seirei Academy caught under the influence of alcohol in the school’s sacred student council room.”

Such a scandalous headline flashed through his mind, and Masachika swiftly ran to the door, locking it in haste.

Of course, most people would probably be understanding once the situation was explained. However, there is always a certain group of individuals in society who would maliciously try to denigrate those with relatively higher social status. Especially considering the fact that a member of the student council is involved, a position that many others aspire to be, excessive caution is not unwarranted.

There’s no guarantee that someone like Kiryuin would appear out of nowhere in the hopes of instigating the fall of the student council again.

With such thoughts in his mind, he closed all the curtains to be safe. Then, with no worry about being observed from outside, he turned around. Maria, still swaying her head left and right, looked at Elena’s face.

“Eh～? Has Elena-senpai… multiplied?”

“Multiplied? What?”

“*Nueeh～?* ”

With an unclear voice, Maria dropped her head forward with a clunk and continued to sway. Concerned that she might fall off her chair while in such a precarious state, Masachika rushed over to her.

“Are you okay, Masha-san? Should I take you to the sofa?”

“*Hmm～?* ”

Raising her head to Masachika’s voice, then tilting her head further, Maria looked up at him and giggled. Spreading her arms wide,

she looked at Masachika and said with a smile, “Are you going to carry me～? *Nn!* ”

Smiling wryly, Masachika replied, “No, carrying you is a bit much…”

“Eeehhh～? Then, huug!”

“Woaah!”

Suddenly embraced around the waist, Masachika reflexively stepped back. Maria, holding onto Masachika's arms, slid down from the chair as if being pulled. Consequently, the arms which had been wrapped around his stomach naturally slid down as well.

"Ah, hey!"

Feeling like his legs were about to be taken out from under him, Masachika hurriedly reached for the table beside him. Then, looking down at Maria, who was now sitting on the floor while still holding onto his legs, he asked,

"Are you okay? Did you hit your knee?"

"*Mm*~"

"Which is it… *Um*, instead of my legs, can you grab onto my arms?"

"Come on, Maria-chan, stand up."

Approaching them, Elena inserted her hands under Maria's arms and tried to lift her… or so it seemed. She didn't budge at all.

"……"

While Masachika gave a lukewarm look, Elena straightened her bent body and wiped the nonexistent sweat from her palm.

"*Phew*… well, let's call it a day for now."

"What do you mean by 'call it a day'?"

"I thoroughly enjoyed feeling Maria-chan's boobs!"

"Why are you casually engaging in sexual harassment! And—"

At that moment, Masachika felt his right hand being tugged and saw Maria slowly standing up, sliding along his arm. Having stood up, she leaned against Masachika's right arm.

"Oh… are you okay, Masha-san?"

"What's going on~~?"

"What do you mean, 'what's going on'…? Anyway, let's head to the sofa for now, okay? Can you walk?"

“*Mm*~. I can walk!”

“I see~. That’s great~”

Casually responding to Maria, who suddenly saluted out of nowhere, Masachika watched her giggle as she pressed her head against his shoulder.

“Hehe, Maa-chan is amazing, right?”

“You’re amazing, you’re amazing.”

“Then~ pet me?”

“Eh?”

“Pet me~ pet meee~~”

While shaking her body as if throwing a tantrum, she continued to press her head in a circular motion.

This is the best.

Inadvertently thinking so with a serious expression, he mentally slapped himself for having such thoughts.

“Well, then…”

Maria didn’t seem like she would walk towards the sofa at this rate, so Masachika hesitantly reached out his hand to her head. Gently stroking her fluffy and soft hair a few times as a faint floral scent wafted from her hair, Maria’s face broke into a smile.

“*Nfufu*~ I’m being pampered~”

Begging for more, Maria pressed her body even closer to Masachika.

Perhaps this is the best after all.

Masachika once again mentally slapped himself for having such thoughts.

“Come on, walk properly…”

Maintaining a serious expression on the surface, he started walking towards the sofa.

“Kuze-kun’s arm is buried in Maria-chan’s chest…”

“Can you show a bit of remorse, Elena-senpai?”

While giving a cold look to his senior who deliberately pointed out things he wasn’t yet conscious of, Masachika, upon reaching near the sofa, looked down at Maria, who was still clinging to his right arm.

“We’ve arrived. Look, can you sit down?”

Swallowing the inner desire to suggest having her lie down with him, Masachika waited for Maria to sit down on her own. And with a vague gaze, Maria tilted her head and opened her mouth.

“*Hmm?* Saa-ku—”

“Hey!”

Reacting swiftly to that critical name that casually slipped out, Masachika covered Maria’s mouth with his hand.

Dangerous, dangerous, dangerous! This is really dangerous!!

Masachika didn’t know if Elena knew Maria’s supposed boyfriend’s name. But if by any chance she did, it could turn out to be quite a problem. What if, in her intoxicated state, Maria mistakenly thought of Masachika as her boyfriend? What excuse would even work?

Even if he managed to deceive Elena with that, if Alisa or Yuki were to come back and overhear, getting out of this unscathed would be quite tricky. Even if Elena didn’t convey the fact that Maria called him Saa-kun, once those two knew, Masachika wasn’t confident in deceiving them.

If that’s the case, I need Elena-senpai to leave!

Deciding so in a split second, Masachika looked back at Elena, who was staring at them, and sternly said,

“Sorry, Elena-senpai! Masha-san seems like she’s about to throw up, so could you bring a bucket or something like that, please!?”

“Eh? But there’s a trash bin right there…”

“But then it would smell bad, right!? Just hurry!”

“Yes!”

Pressed by Masachika's forceful words, Elena hastily headed towards the door. Fumbling to unlock it, she rolled out of the student council room.

"*Phew*…"

With the crisis averted for the moment, Masachika took a breath.

"Ah, sorry."

Noticing Maria, who was looking at him with curious eyes with her mouth still covered, Masachika gently removed his hand. Maria then tilted her head and asked,

"Saa-kun, multiplied… too?"

"I haven't multiplied."

"Ehhh? Which one is mine, and which one is Alya-chan's?"

"I told you, I'm not capable of mitosis."

"*Mmm*~ Then I'll go with this one!"

Whether Maria could hear Masachika's retorts or not, she once again hugged Masachika's arm tightly.

"No, it's not like I—"

"Nfu~ It's a double date then~"

"What??"

Sighing at his increasingly incomprehensible conversation with Maria, Masachika tried to relock the door that Elena had left open.

However, in the process…

"Um, Masha-san, could you let go?"

With Maria still firmly holding onto Masachika's arm, he asked her to release him. Yet Maria pouted, shaking her head.

"Noo~"

"What do you mean 'no'…"

Refusing like a child, Maria left Masachika in a state of bewilderment.

Helplessly, he looked down at Maria, who was still clinging to his arm. Then, attempting to drag her towards the door…

“Noo~!”

“Uh—Woah!”

Masachika’s arm was suddenly pulled forcefully, catching him off guard. Before he knew it, he toppled onto the sofa. Relieved that he hadn’t bumped into her, Masachika was nonetheless shaken by Maria’s surprising strength.

Where did that strength come from? Could it be that the alcohol had turned off her brain limiters?

Such absurd thoughts crossed his mind as he marveled at Maria’s incredible physical strength. Despite his concern for not hurting Maria, her strength surpassed that of an average girl. Even now, Masachika found himself lying on the sofa, unable to break free from her grasp.

“Um~… Masha-san? Could you let go, please?”

Sitting down next to her and leaning down, he made the request again. However, Maria, still with her face down, softly replied, “No.”

This left Masachika in a dilemma.

“When you say ‘no’ like that… Is something bothering you?”

He didn’t expect a coherent conversation, yet he still asked her the question lingering in his mind. In response, Maria lifted her face, eyes slightly teary.

“Because… you’re planning to go to Alya-chan, right?”

“What?”

“No, I won’t let you go.”

Masha muttered those words as she buried her face into his shoulder. Despite knowing that her words were most likely mere drunken nonsense, Masachika couldn’t bring himself to dismiss and brush off her statement as such, and his body stiffened.

“I won’t go anywhere. I’m just going to lock the door for a moment.”

Barely managing to convey the truth, Masachika reassured her.

Maria lifted her face once again, whispering to him at an uncomfortably close distance.

“Hey, Saa-kun…”

“Yes?”

“Do you… like me?”

“!?”

Caught off guard by the unexpected question, Masachika’s eyes widened. His cheeks twitched, and with an awkward smile, he hastily attempted to dodge it.

“Looks like you seem quite drunk.”

“Do you like me?”

However, Maria shattered his feeble attempt to divert the question with a repeated direct inquiry. Masachika, increasingly uneasy, intensified his awkward smile. Yet, as he looked into Maria’s light brown eyes, which were moistened with tears, he sighed and closed his own eyes for a moment before gazing towards the ceiling.

“…I do like you. As a person.”

He answered truthfully, and with gritted teeth, he added,

“…Probably, as a woman too. I think I like you.”

This was Masachika’s sincere sentiment. He believed he was drawn to Maria, his first love, whom he miraculously reunited with after several years. However—

“But to admit that… I’m not ready yet.”

With his current self, devoid of pride, he couldn’t accept such affection from Maria. Forcing such acceptance would likely burden him, making Maria’s feelings a weight on his shoulders and potentially causing him to dislike himself even more.

I need to first… like the me that Masha-san likes.

With determination, he needed to embrace her affection proudly.

To do so, he knew what he had to do, but he had been avoiding it for a long time.

And… I'll stop running away.

The time to face what would happen was drawing near, and Masachika could sense it. So here, right now, he decided to make a promise.

"I swear…"

Opening his heavy heart, he squeezed out the words. He declared to Maria and, more importantly, to himself.

"I will definitely… confront my mistakes. The mistakes that have led me to become who I am now."

Saying only that, Masachika met Maria's gaze and pleaded.

"So… will you wait for me? Someday, I will surely face Masha-san's feelings too."

Masachika's words were filled with his utmost sincerity. In response, Maria shook her eyes and lowered her face.

"*Mmm*, you say such difficult things, but I don't get it."

"Ehhh~ Seriously? I gathered quite a bit of courage just now to say that, you know?"

Far from being deflated, Maria's reaction was way beyond Masachika's expectations. He slumped onto the sofa, thinking that maybe it was a mistake to engage seriously with a drunk person. Maria, dissatisfied, tugged at Masachika's arm with pursed lips.

"Tell me more straightforwardly. Do you like me?"

In response to this somewhat incoherent question, Masachika answered with a wry smile.

"…Yes, I do like you."

"Liar."

"I see, my response doesn't matter to you, huh?"

To Maria, who turned a deaf ear, Masachika felt his intention to

engage in a serious conversion diminishing.

Ah~ come on, can you just go to sleep already? …Like a normal drunk person.

Having her sleep would surely eliminate the risk of someone else potentially hearing their conversation. But as Masachika casually contemplated such a notion with a somewhat indifferent attitude, Maria's sulking voice reached his ears.

"The truth is… you probably liked the old me better."

Those unexpected words made Masachika freeze for a moment before turning to Maria with a serious expression. Then, with a dissatisfied pout and moist eyes, Maria looked back at him.

"The truth is, you liked the old me with blonde, longer hair, and blue eyes. You liked me when I was more slender."

"…What?"

"Because, Kuze-kun, you didn't understand me back then."

Those words pierced Masachika's chest. Unable to find a response, he continued to stare at Maria. Pouting her lips slightly, she looked at him with teary eyes.

"It's because I've changed that you don't like me anymore, right?"

That's not true. Such a retort immediately came to mind… yet, for some reason, Masachika couldn't say it.

How could he confidently deny it? To Masachika, who was bewildered by Maria's changed appearance even after realizing she was Maa-chan, would he be able to assert that he didn't struggle to see her as the same person from back then?

If… Masha-san had grown up maintaining that image from back then…

Long, fluffy golden hair, sparkling blue eyes, and a childlike smile that remained unchanged in adulthood. If she had appeared in front of him again with a figure that unmistakably identified her as Maria, even before finding out that she was Maa-chan, Masachika would have probably fallen back in love with her at first sight. There was no evidence within Masachika to deny that.

"……"

“I knew it. It’s like that.”

As if interpreting Masachika’s silence as affirmation, Maria distanced herself from him and covered her face with both hands.

“Ah, no.”

“*Sniff*”

“!?”

The sound of sniffling that reached Masachika’s ears pierced his heart with intense guilt.

His top priority of locking the door had been blown from his mind. Masachika twisted on the sofa, turning his whole body towards Maria.

“Um, well…”

“… *Sniff* I didn’t change because I wanted to… My hair color, eye color, even my body… kept getting thicker.”

“U-Uh? Thicker, you say…”

“But I heard that boys like girls like that. Or so, I thought… But, Saa-kun, you still like the old me…”

“N-No.”

Maria confessed an unexpected serious concern, prompting Masachika to shout impulsively.

“I—! I think the current Masha-san is very attractive too… I mean, I really like the current Masha-san!”

At Masachika’s straightforward declaration, Maria lifted her face abruptly. Then, with slightly reddened eyes, she asked pleadingly.

“Really…? Do you really like me?”

“W-Well, um… Masha-san’s hair and eyes are very beautiful… I like them.”

“…More than the old me?”

“*Gh!* ”

Unable to answer that question immediately, Masachika's gaze wandered momentarily. Maria turned her face away in response.

"I knew it, it was a lie…"

"No, it's not like that! It's not about which one I like more, I like both, um… I like both equally…"

Though he thought of himself as indecisive, Masachika justified himself with the excuse, "It's the truth…" However, Maria turned away with a dismissive expression.

"Lies, I don't believe it."

"It's really true… How can I convince you?"

In response to Masachika's question, Maria, perhaps due to the influence of alcohol, looked at him with an oddly composed gaze. She

grabbed Masachika's right hand, took it to the side of her face, tilted her head, and allowed Masachika's hand to touch her hair.

"Then look at me and say it. Do you like my hair?"

"I-I like it."

Feeling a bit unsettled from the touch of her hair against his palm, Masachika looked straight into Maria's eyes as he spoke. And as he did, Maria closed her eyes, nuzzling her cheek against his hand. Then, with her cheek still against his palm, she opened her eyes and asked,

"Do you like my eyes?"

"I like—"

Just as he was about to say that…

Masachika heard approaching footsteps and the voices of two familiar people. It was Alisa and Yuki, who should have been dealing with the Raikokai in the student council room with Touya.

In an instant, an intense sense of crisis pierced Masachika's spine.

Wait, those two are already back!? This is bad, this is bad! This is seriously bad!!

Sweating nervously, Masachika stared at the unlocked door, and a

worried voice reached him directly.

“Saa-kun…?”

Returning his gaze to the front at that voice, Masachika, who still had his right hand in Maria’s grasp, briefly considered executing a secret technique known as “everyone’s beloved neck chop.”

But if I mess it up, it might leave lasting effects, and besides, it’s not right to do that to someone who hasn’t committed any crime!!

Immediately rejecting that idea, Masachika hastily shouted an improvised excuse.

“Uh, I like it, I like it! So… excuse me for a moment!”

Even as the footsteps and voices approaching the student council room gradually grew louder, Masachika forcefully and somewhat

unceremoniously pulled Maria’s hand with his left hand, dashed to the door, and swiftly but carefully closed and locked it.

Now, finally, a moment of relief… However, this is where a new problem begins.

How am I going to explain why they can’t enter the student council room!?

If it were just Alisa, Masachika would have the confidence to come up with a convincing excuse. The problem was Yuki.

Any half-baked excuses wouldn’t work with her, and if Yuki, who loved mischief, sensed something interesting or suspicious, she would likely attempt to break in no matter what.

Is there anything I can use!? A necessary and rational reason!

What if the student council room is being waxed? I need to put up a sign… no, it’s too late for that! I need a reason why I’m inside and can’t let anyone else in—

Squeeze out a convincing reason!

Having somehow managed to organize his thoughts, Masachika swiftly moved away from the door. Just as he did, a knock, followed by the door rattling, echoed throughout the room.

“Oh? Why is the door locked…?”

To Yuki's questioning voice from the other side of the door, Masachika, feigning casualness, called out.

"Ah, Yuki. Sorry! I'm in a bit of a…"

"Masachika-kun? Is something wrong?"

"Yeah~~ It's a bit difficult to explain, but…"

"Masachika-kun, can you at least open the door for me?"

"Well, I can't do that right now…"

"Why not?"

"Ah~ well…"

Deliberately obfuscating his words in response to Yuki and Alisa's inquiries, Masachika played it up. Humans tend to stay satisfied so long as they feel that they've gained something by uncovering hidden information, regardless of its veracity.

Thus, keeping Alisa hanging until the last moment, Masachika reluctantly spoke in a tone that conveyed difficulty.

"Well, you see… earlier, Elena-senpai brought a durian cake. So the student council room smells really bad right now."

After a few seconds of silence, seemingly unable to grasp the situation, Alisa's voice filled with bewilderment and skepticism reached him.

"Eh, why Elena-senpai? And durian?"

"No, it seems she intended to hold a post-sports festival party for us… but the moment she opened the cake's packaging, it effectively turned into a serious stink bomb. I have no idea why she chose something like that. Ask her about it. She left just now in order to get some air freshener.

While internally offering apologies to Elena, Masachika continued to spin his tale. People tend to find somewhat bizarre stories surprisingly believable, after all. Moreover, Elena had the image of doing such eccentric things.

As he concocted this lie, imagining Elena protesting in his mind, Masachika, with a stuffed-up voice and a genuinely exasperated tone, continued his explanation.

“So, currently, we’re in the process of urgently resealing the cake, ventilating the room, and using air freshener to cover up the smell. It’s not like the situation is really bad, but it’s better to leave early for today.

The smell will probably stick to your clothes and body.”

“So, it’s like that… Well, if that’s the case, it can’t be helped. But Masachika-kun, are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’ve already gotten used to it… even though it still stinks, it seems to be getting better, so I’ll be fine.”

Relieved that he managed to convince Alisa for now, Masachika quietly celebrated inwardly. Just then, Yuki’s considerate voice reached him.

“Well, don’t push yourself too hard…”

Those words prompted Masachika to think that his plan was actually working, however…

“By the way, Masachika-kun. There’s something I’m a little curious about regarding a past donation. Could you get the documents summarizing the donations from the Raikokai?”

In response to Yuki’s words, Masachika realized his judgment had been too lax.

“…No, the documents probably stink too, and opening this door defeats the whole purpose of containing the stench in the first place.”

“Just open it for a moment. Maybe it won’t be as smelly to us as you think, right?”

Yuki’s implication convinced Masachika.

Damn, did she sense that there might be something going on!?

Her voice coming from the other side was still refined and ladylike. However, in Masachika’s mind, he could vividly imagine his little sister hiding a devilish smile behind the archaic smile plastered on her face on the other side of the door. Along with that, he pictured Alisa standing next to her, looking confused.

What should I do…

As he pondered this, he heard a new voice.

“Huh? Alisa-chan, Yuki-chan, you guys are done and back already?”

“Thanks for your hard work, Elena-senpai… you’re dressed quite impressively. Leaving that aside, about this—”

“Ah, Elena-senpai, you’re back! I’ve already resealed the durian cake, but did you find the air freshener? Or at least some deodorant?

Well, I have doubts on whether it’d work in the first place!!”

Interrupting Yuki, who was on course to expose his lie, Masachika raised his voice. Then, hoping Elena would understand what he was trying to do, he stared at the door.

Three tension-filled seconds passed… before Elena’s voice was heard.

“Ahh~~ Well, I thought of borrowing some deodorant from a friend in a sports club, but they’ve already gone home… I couldn’t find the air freshener from the toilet, so I just brought a plastic bag and a bucket to seal the cake for now.”

Yes!!

Truly, befitting of a former vice-president, Elena displayed her remarkable quick-wittedness, and Masachika silently celebrated with a fist pump. Furthermore, Alisa provided supporting fire.

“Well then… shall we go home now? Yuki-san, the documents can wait until tomorrow, right?”

This seemed unexpected even for Yuki, who after a short pause, said with a somewhat disappointed voice.

“…Yes, that’s true. Well then, excuse us. Masachika-kun, see you tomorrow.”

“Oh~ yeah, see you tomorrow.”

“See you later then.”

“Yeah, Alya, good work today too.”

It might not have been obvious to her, but Masachika sent his gratitude in his mind to his partner who threw him a lifeline.

【 *He's really helpless.* 】

Then, to the faintly heard Russian through the door, Masachika's expression stiffened.

Eh, what does that mean…? Alya, could it be…

Ignoring Masachika, who was struck by something resembling a shiver, the footsteps of the two gradually faded away. And from beyond the door, Elena's voice, somewhat resentful, reached his ears.

"Oi… why am I being treated as an annoying senior who brought a durian cake to the student council room?"

"I'm really sorry about that."

There was no room for defense on this matter, and Masachika apologized sincerely. In response, Elena let out a sigh and said.

"Well, whatever… So, how's Maria-chan? Anyway, I brought the bucket and plastic bag."

Even Masachika, who had been relieved by bypassing Yuki and Alisa's attacks, suddenly realized something in response to Elena's question.

Huh… come to think of it, Masha-san's been quiet for a while.

Maybe she fell asleep…?

Holding onto such wishful thinking, Masachika, thanking Elena for the time being, glanced at Maria… and his eyes widened.

Wha—?

While trying to stand up from the sofa, Maria seemed to have staggered. She was currently sitting on the floor in a wariza-sitting posture[3] in front of the sofa.

"Saa-kun… **sniff**, after all, Alya-chan is better for you after all…"

Maria looked down as she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, perhaps interpreting the conversation he had with Alisa through the door in a strange way. But what concerned Masachika more was her chest! Her undeniable… or rather, unhidden breasts!

Why is she undressing!?

A discarded blazer on the sofa. Shoes, socks, and her skirt lying on the floor. Maria was only wearing a white shirt and underwear… and regarding that shirt, all the front buttons were undone. In other words, she could barely hide her chest with her arms.

“Kuze-kun? Is Maria-chan…”

“…Wait, she’s in a state that can’t be shown to others!”

“Eh!? Does that mean… I didn’t make it in time?”

“Sorry, I’m a bit confused too, so can Elena-senpai leave early today as well?”

“I-I see. Right, Maria-chan probably wouldn’t want to be seen then… I’ll leave the rest to you? Sorry about this. Oh, I’ll leave the bucket and plastic bag here just in case.”

With those words, Elena’s footsteps moved away. It felt like he had caused some unintended misunderstanding, but Masachika didn’t have the luxury to worry about it right now.

“(Hey, Masha-san, why are you undressing?)”

Avoiding direct eye contact with Maria as much as possible, Masachika approached her with a hushed voice. Then, in the corner of his vision, he saw Maria’s face brighten up.

“Ahh～ Saa-kun is here～”

While giving a faint smile to Maria, who suddenly raised a cheerful voice, Masachika crouched down and spoke to her like she’s a child.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m here… let’s put on some clothes, okay?”

“*N’fu～? N’fufu～～♪*”

“No, stop with the ‘ *N’fu～?* ’ …Or rather, it’s dangerous to shake your body so much.”

Masachika continued to calm Maria, who was rocking her body from side to side with a suspicious laugh, without looking directly at her, focusing on the surroundings. But suddenly, his right hand was pulled, and Masachika turned his gaze in that direction.

Maria was holding Masachika’s hand by the wrist with her right hand and the back of his hand with her left. And at the end of the pull—

“Wait a minute.”

Seeing something he couldn’t directly look at, Masachika quickly pulled back his arm. With a serious expression, he questioned Maria.

“What on earth are you trying to do?”

“Ehhh～? Continuing from where we left off?”

“Continuing…?”

Upon hearing that, Masachika remembered. Earlier, he had said he liked Maria’s hair and eyelids as he touched them. Figuring out what she was trying to do now, his head suddenly rushed with blood.

“No, no, no! Where are you trying to get me to touch you!? You shouldn’t do that!”

Masachika vigorously shook off Maria’s hand, and with a bit too much momentum, as he ended up falling on the floor. Still averting his face, he screamed in a mix of panic and horror.

And as soon as he did that, tears welled up in Maria’s eyes as she lowered her head.

“I knew it… Saa-kun prefers the old me, from when I was more delicate… You won’t even look at me properly at all now…”

“No, like I said, that’s not it…”

In response to the voice that involuntarily stimulated a sense of guilt, Masachika turned towards Maria with a perplexed expression…

and inadvertently swallowed his saliva as he saw her body up close.

Maria’s beautiful face, a combination of the innocence of a young girl and the kindness of a mother, calmed all those who laid eyes on her.

In contrast, below her neck was a body filled with a demonic allure that could drive anyone mad.

Encased in a black bra were her overly voluptuous mounds… no, spheres. Her gracefully curvy waist that was so slender yet soft and pliable. Flawless thighs that were both plump and firm, exuding a luscious texture and youthful resilience… Masachika looked up at the ceiling to divert his gaze.

Hmm~ *, there have been quite a number of promising anime adaptations that have started to emerge recently, but out of all the*

recent ones, I'd have to say only three can really be considered top-tier~

As Masachika fully indulged in his escapism, Maria's pitiful voice reached his ears.

"*Uuu~~* Y-You looked away~"

"No, it's not that you're unbearable to look at, it's more like I can't endure it…"

Slightly bowing his head and saying so while focusing on the top of Maria's head, Masachika suddenly realized that Maria had bent down and was no longer in his line of sight. Carefully lowering his gaze, he found… well, a remarkably large and splendid butt.

Ngh!

Hastily lowering his gaze even further, Masachika met eyes with Maria, who was staring at him from an extremely close distance.

Surprisingly, Maria had fallen on all fours between Masachika's legs after he hit the floor.

"*Uoooh!?* "

In a position reminiscent of the time where he had fallen down while dancing with Alisa during the post-cultural festival celebrations, Masachika instinctively tried to move backward, attempting to retreat…

but lost his balance and slammed his elbow onto the floor.

"*Ow!?* "

Along with a sharp pain and a tingling sensation running from both elbows to his forearms, Masachika couldn't brace his arms and collapsed backward from his back.

"*Waaaah~!* "

Stretching both his arms to endure the pain and tingling, Masachika found his vision being blocked by Maria's head.

She had placed her hands next to his shoulders as she loomed over

him. Her hair, sparkling under the ceiling lights, swayed at a ticklish distance from Masachika's cheek.

"Hey, Saa-kun…"

"Okay, Masha-san, let's calm down. You're not in your right mind right now."

Staring into Maria's teary eyes, Masachika desperately spoke, intensely contemplating how to navigate through this situation.

No, it's okay. If I can shake off the numbness in my arms, I can easily counter this kind of grappling technique. Fortunately, she still has her shirt on, so I'll start by pulling out my right leg and grabbing her back…

Shifting his head into battle mode, Masachika tried hard to detach his consciousness from Maria's alluring figure. And at that moment, Maria threw another question at him.

"Could it be… you hate me now?"

"Absolutely not. In fact, I like you. And it's not an exaggeration to say that."

"Then… touch me?"

"Don't say such unreasonable things."

As he responded with a deadpan expression, Maria's moistened eyes started to regain their composure.

"Okay. I understand. I'll touch you."

Stirred intensely by the sense of crisis in her eyes, Masachika promptly said so, causing Maria to rapidly blink a few times as she chuckled. In that moment,

Now!!

Quickly folding his right leg, Masachika withdrew it from under Maria's body. Then, moving his still slightly numb arms, he grabbed Maria's back with his right hand and held her right leg with his left, attempting to roll to the side…

Hm?

His right hand… touched a mysterious, hard sensation beneath

Maria's shirt on her back, and Masachika suddenly felt puzzled.

What is this? Some kind of metal—?

And in an instant, after pondering that,

"*Uooh!?* "

Intuitively sensing the nature of that sensation, Masachika quickly let go. Looking down at the frozen Masachika, Maria blinked again. Tilting her head curiously,

"Ah!"

Seemingly understanding something, she nodded, lifted her upper body, and straddled Masachika's abdomen.

"No, wait—!?"

At the feeling of Maria's buttocks against his lower abdomen, Masachika was left speechless. Reflexively glancing in that direction, her shorts came into view, realizing that everything except for her crucial private area was slightly see-through.

White, fleshy thighs. Against that fair skin, mature and sexy black shorts vividly stood out, showcasing an enchanting groin area.

Forgetting shame and guilt, Masachika unintentionally stared at that spot, but after a few seconds, he somehow mustered the last of his reason and tightly closed his eyes.

Dumbass! Don't look, don't touch, don't be conscious of it! This is Maa-chan we're talking about! And she's not in her right mind! If I do something here, I'll regret it like crazy later!!

With eyes shut tight, gritting his teeth, Masachika's ears picked up a small sound… a soft snap.

"?"

Opening his eyes slightly to the unidentified sound, Masachika saw Maria with her hands behind her back. Their eyes met, and Maria, blushing, brought her hands back up front.

"Geez, You should have just said so if you wanted me to take them off."

Saying this, Maria loosened her shoulder straps. Paired with her shirt smoothly sliding down, the last barrier covering her ample chest succumbed to gravity and fell down. Now only in her shorts, Maria looked embarrassed yet inviting, smiling.

“It’s okay, you know? Since it’s all for Saa-kun… and for Saa-kun to like me. So… it’s okay?”

Forgetting to squint at some point, Masachika, upon hearing Maria’s words, unconsciously thought,

Maybe… it wouldn’t be so bad to regret it later.

Regret like crazy? What was that about? If you’re a man, shouldn’t you bet everything on this moment!?

If I can touch this treasure right now, I won’t regret it, even if I die!!

Wide-eyed and making a somewhat manly declaration in his mind, Masachika slammed the back of his head against the floor. A dull thud echoed in his head as the pain involuntarily shut his eyes.

Taking advantage of this, Masachika kept his eyes tightly closed, repeating a chant amidst the pain.

This is Maa-chan we’re talking about, this is Maa-chan we’re talking about, this is Maa-chan we’re talking about—

As if answering his chant, beautiful memories from their childhood flooded his mind. As he gazed at them with the eyes of his heart, he naturally felt a gentle emotion. In this state of calm, just as he opened his eyes—

“*Uuu.*”

Maria, emitting a muffled groan from the depths of her throat, suddenly collapsed onto Masachika.

“No, wait—!”

Startled, Masachika quickly raised both hands to support her shoulders… but it was too late. His hands buried themselves into the mountain range that rose before her shoulders.

“*Uooooh*!? I touched it~!?”

The sense of softness transmitted through both hands, as her breasts

overflowed between his fingers, left Masachika wide-eyed. And overhead, an ominous sound was heard.

"*Urpfh*."

Raising his gaze due to the unpleasant premonition running down his spine, Masachika saw Maria frowning and closing her eyes, seeming uncomfortable.

"I feel kinda gross…"

"Speaking without thinking," so that's what the phrase means. But there was no time to dwell on such matters. Because if things continued like this, Masachika's face would be covered in vomit.

"No, seriously, spare me, Masha-san! No one wants you to vomit on their face as a reward, and I haven't realized to the extent that I consider that a reward!?"

In a panic, Masachika desperately considered forcibly escaping from this situation. After carefully lowering Maria's body onto himself and gently stroking her back, Masachika's desperate caregiving (?) paid off as Maria safely avoided vomiting, as she quietly started to breathe steadily while lying on top of him. However, what remained was the image of Masachika, trapped underneath a half-naked Maria, unable to move.

"…Something like this happened during our summer visit to the beach."

Muttering such a thing, almost escaping from reality, Masachika gazed up at the ceiling. However, considering the possibility of someone else dropping by the student council room, he couldn't just leave things like this.

Wait, I need to hurry before Ayano arrives!

Just as he realized this, a knock on the door echoed through the room once again. After all, Masachika didn't hear any footsteps approaching the room, so the sudden knock almost caused his heart to stop.

"Excuse me—"

"Ah, Ayano! Sorry, I'm kinda busy right now—"

…After managing to somehow send Ayano away and cleaning up the

mess in various senses, Maria finally woke up. And upon waking up, she had no recollection whatsoever of what happened after she ate the second piece of chocolate. Yet Masachika, who remembered everything, would spend some time in a constant cycle of regret and self-loathing, sinking into depression.

[1]: A small French pastry characterized by its soft custard center and thick caramelized crust.

It is often flavored with rum and vanilla.

[2]: Raisins soaked in rum (or bourbon) to make rum raisins.

[3]: The raws literally mean “girl’s sitting posture” (女の子座り) which has the same meaning as the term “wariza-sitting” shown in the picture below.

Chapter 6 - Game

The day after the “Maria intoxication incident,” all members of the student council gathered together in the student council room.

On the left side of the long table, in the order closest to the door, was Ayano, Yuki, Chisaki, and Touya. On the right side was Masachika, Alisa, Maria, and Illegal Girl—Elena.

“Trick or treat!”

“Like I said yesterday, it’s already November.”

Utilizing the lessons learned from yesterday, Elena organized a thoroughly alcohol-free post-sports festival party (redo). However Elena, for some reason still in the Halloween spirit, received a half-hearted retort from Masachika.

As if continuing from yesterday, Elena, now transformed into a magical girl, spoke up while waving her magic wand.

“But Kuze-kun, even you’re cosplaying. So what’s the big deal?”

“I didn’t do it willingly, I was suddenly kidnapped by the handicraft club!”

Masachika shouted while wearing a suspicious priest outfit with an evil eye design. In his hands, rather than a Bible, he held a book that looked more like a forbidden text. This was all because after school, as he was about to enter the student council room, he was suddenly abducted by members of the handicraft club and forcibly dressed in this outfit.

“Or rather, this was definitely Elena-senpai’s order, right?”

“I think it’s unfair for me to be the only one embarrassed in cosplay!”

“Maybe try to stop causing collateral damage!?”

Masachika protested to his senior, who arbitrarily dressed up and tried to involve him, but…

“*Heeh*~ Kuze-kun, are you in a position to say something like that?”

“What are you talking about? I’ve been in high spirits since the beginning. Halloween is the best!”

Receiving a glare from Elena, this lil’ junior, who had slandered his senior as someone who brought a smelly durian cake to the student council yesterday, gracefully flipped his expression.

“Did something happen between Kuze-kun and Elena-senpai?”

“No, it’s nothing, Masha-san.”

To Maria who dressed as a devil and tilted her head, Masachika quickly answered while facing forward. His gaze was strictly facing ahead! Resolutely ahead! This was because, in addition to yesterday’s events, Maria’s cosplay stuck to her body lines in order to emphasize her curvaceous figure, making it a little awkward for Masachika to look in her direction.

“Masachika-kun…?”

Masachika, who remained fixedly facing forward, received a puzzled look from Alisa. Alisa’s costume, following Masachika’s cosplay theme as a pairing for the election campaign, was a nun’s cosplay.

Now if asked whether looking her way was reassuring; it wasn’t.

Whether it was due to the fantasy of a nun belonging to a cult, or just the personal taste’s of those who made the costume, Alisa’s shoulders, her chest, and her thighs were exposed to the point where it even seemed like her underwear might be visible. It made one question, “Isn’t that too revealing for someone who’s supposed to be a nun?” The situation left Masachika unsure where to look.

So, Masachika, in order to avoid the visually assaulting beauties beside him, kept his gaze fixed on the seats in front and diverted the conversation.

“So they *did* have a regular witch costume.”

In front of that gaze was Yuki, dressed in a witch cosplay.

Wrapped in a black one-piece with a black robe and pointed hat, it exuded an unmistakable witchy atmosphere. Looking at the irony that she was the one dressed as a witch while Elena cosplayed a magical

girl, one couldn't help but wonder, "Why did it turn out like this?"

By the way, next to Yuki, Ayano dressed up as a black cat (?)—perhaps a witch's familiar. What was questionable was that the only part of her attire that could be called cosplay were her cat ears and tail, with the rest of her outfit being another one-piece dress. Perhaps it was to create the image of a magically transformed black cat, rather than a simple regular one

"…Witch costumes like that are pretty normal… but they can also be like *that*."

Masachika tilted his head inquiringly at Elena, who spoke with a distant look.

"What do you mean by 'that'? Were there other costumes you could have chosen aside from that Illegal Girl one?"

"Don't call me an illegal girl! I protested, you know! But then, they gave me a costume where the skirt was torn up to the base of my legs as an alternative, so what could I do!"

"So was that one really a witch costume?"

Or perhaps it was a costume of a demonic woman, abbreviated to witch. Thinking about it that way, Maria sitting next to Elena nodded.

"Oh, that one~. I wore it at first too, and indeed, it was too exposing."

"You wore it!?"

"Yeah, the handicraft club members said things like, 'This is no good. Someone might die.' So, I had to change into this costume instead~"

"……"

What kind of indecent costume was it? It piqued Masachika's curiosity, but considering yesterday's events, if she had shown up in

such an outfit, there was a high probability that Masachika would have become the first casualty. Well, her current costume is quite stimulating as it is too!

Actually, isn't Elena-senpai's current outfit quite revealing as well? Is that okay?

While avoiding looking in that direction, Masachika harbored a simple

question. He teased Elena with the “Illegal Girl” label, but objectively speaking, Elena’s costume was quite provocative too. In fact, in an objective comparison, Elena had the highest level of cleavage exposure. To the extent that one might wonder, “Will her breasts pop out if she jumps?” Well, even considering that, the overall tightness of the costume was more prominent than the sexiness it exuded (※Personal opinion).

“By the way, how about the president and vice-president?”

Seeing Touya and Chisaki taking pictures together a while ago, Masachika’s expression became a bit awkward. The reason was evident.

Their costumes were noticeably different from everyone else’s…

“I hate to say it, but doesn’t it seem… dull?”

Masachika deliberately used the term “dull,” but to be frank, it was clear that there was a lack of enthusiasm in their cosplay. Touya had a giant screw attached to both sides of his head with a headband, and that was it, apart from wearing a simple bulky coat instead of the school blazer. Chisaki, on the other hand, only added a bloody white coat over her uniform.

“Frankenstein, right? Probably.”

Looking at the giant screw seemingly piercing Touya’s head, Alisa commented. In response, Maria and Yuki also chimed in.

“The president and Chisaki-chan being a pair means…”

“A combination of a monster and the scientist who created it, I suppose.”

“So then their gig is Frankenstein, huh? Though that in itself is a bit confusing.”

Masachika said this while looking at Chisaki, with Alisa tilting her head next to him.

“*Hm?* What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s often misunderstood, but the monster is actually nameless. The name Frankenstein belongs to the scientist who created it”

“Oh, is that so?”

As Alisa was receiving such an explanation, Elena answered Masachika's original question.

"Touya and Chisaki couldn't be abducted by the handicraft club members."

"Was it purely a matter of strength?"

"Yes, especially with Chisaki. Even the handicraft club members who occasionally go berserk were easily subdued…"

"I see."

So, Chisaki quietly put together their costumes and discreetly retreated. It was quite an amusing sight to think that the attackers who abducted Masachika and the others in high spirits were sneaking around like thieves when dealing with Touya and Chisaki.

"Well they did try to forcibly put the costumes on us by surprise, so I decided to subdue them."

"Isn't your killing intent a bit too high, Sarashina-senpai?"

In response to Masachika's deadpan retort, Chisaki, who was taking pictures of Touya, raised an eyebrow.

"*Hm?* It's not like I want to. But if someone suddenly comes from behind… you know?"

"Even if you ask me to agree, a normal person wouldn't be able to react like that if someone came up behind them."

"You mean you guys can't do it on reflex before you can even react to what's happening?"

"I'll try not to stand behind Sarashina-senpai from now on…"

Facing a senior more dangerous than a genuine assassin, Masachika declared this with a slight shiver. In response, Touya nodded with a nostalgic expression.

"When we started dating, I tried to do the 'Who's there?' gig on a whim, and before I knew it, I got punched square in the jaw."

"I'm surprised you guys didn't break up at that point."

"And then Touya fainted. We had our first date again a few days

later.”

“Your guys’ first date?”

“So in the end, I started calling out to her normally after that…

but someday, I’ll definitely be able to pull that gig on her.”

“Touya…”

“May you both be forever happy!”

As Masachika declared to the two lovebirds locked in each other’s passionate gazes, Elena raised her voice, holding a paper cup filled with juice.

“Well then, let’s get started!”

In response to her shout, the others also held up their paper cups.

Confirming that, Elena raised her cup.

“To celebrate the safe conclusion of the sports festival, cheers!”

“““““““““Cheers!”””””””””

And so, lightly clinking their cups, everyone reached for their snacks. Just as they were about to indulge—

“Wait a minute!”

At Elena’s restraining voice, everyone paused simultaneously. In the midst of the puzzled expressions that were simultaneously directed at her, Elena, with a triumphant smile, shook her head left and right.

“Oh my, did you really think you could just eat your snacks without anything happening? How naive, as sweet as sugar candies, my juniors!”

Seeing Elena theatrically widening her eyes, Masachika clasped his hands together.

“Itadakimasu.”

“Hey! Don’t ignore me there!”

“Huh? Wasn’t that whole thing about saying ‘Itadakimasu’

properly?”

“I didn’t mean some child-friendly moral story like that, you know!?”

After retorting with a natural expression, Elena lightly cleared her throat. Once again, with a triumphant smile, she stood up, looked around at all the student council members, and then thrust her hands forward.

“You guys will now participate in a game involving these snacks!

Note that there’s no option to refuse!”

“Isn’t this childlike?”

“The Singing Onee-san[1]… no, maybe more like the Painful Onee-san?”

Masachika’s no-nonsense retort and Yuki’s merciless comment pierced the now pained magical girl who just heartwarmingly proposed a harmless minigame.

“Hey, Yuki-chan!? How could you just casually say something so cruel just now!?”

At the sight of Yuki showing no remorse for such a ruthless remark, Elena let out a shriek. However,

“Eh? What’s the matter?”

Yuki wore a bewildered, archaic smile. A reaction so natural that it made one wonder, ‘Huh? Did I mishear her?’

“Huh? It hurts, you know…”

“Eh? It does?”

“Ah, no, it’s nothing…”

Baffled by the diversion, Elena tilted her head in confusion but decided to back down. Then, regaining her composure, she thrust her hands forward again.

“Or rather, you guys will now participate in a game involving these snacks! Yes, I’ve prepared the ultimate intellectual pastime, you see…”

To Elena, who chuckled suspiciously, Masachika calmly remarked, “Don’t expect something like mahjong to work though.”

“Touya-kun? What have you been telling your underclassmen?”

“He said that after joining the student council, you and the other seniors destroyed him in a rigged game of mahjong.”

“So you spilled the beans! All of it!”

“Well, isn’t that because it’s a tradition in the student council…”

“That’s obviously a lie.”

“For real…? Eh? Then why was I destroyed so mercilessly?”

“Now, the game you’ll play is…”

“Vice-President?”[2]

Ignoring Touya’s inquiry splendidly, Elena, after building up suspense, declared.

“The Trick or Treat Game!”

At the mention of the game’s name, Masachika and the others exchanged glances and simultaneously tilted their heads.

“The Trick or Treat Game? I’ve never heard of it…”

“Well, I came up with it.”

“Seriously…”

Was it a proper game? Despite the concerns of Masachika and others, Elena took out four cards from her bag. The back of the cards were designed with an illustration of a Jack-o’-lantern, which appeared homemade, yet properly laminated and somewhat authentic.

When Elena turned them over, three cards had the word “Treat”

with illustrations of sweets, while the remaining one had the word

“Trick” along with an illustration of the devil. Elena took out another identical set of cards, holding a total of eight cards, and began explaining with four in each hand.

“You guys will compete one-on-one using these four cards. First, decide the order of play with rock-paper-scissors. The player who goes first chooses one of these four cards and places it face down on the table.”

While speaking, Elena placed one card face down on the table from her set of four.

“On the other hand, the defensive player who goes second has two choices. Namely, to either present a snack or not.”

“Snack… you mean these?”

Pointing with his gaze at the individually wrapped muffins, financiers, and madeleines[3] on his paper plate, Masachika asked. Elena nodded.

“Yes, choose one of those three sweets to put on the table or choose to pass without presenting anything. For example, let’s assume you didn’t present anything… After that choice has been made, we reveal the cards.”

When Elena flipped the card that had been placed face down, it displayed the word “Treat.”

“In the case of a Treat card, if a snack has been presented by the defending player, you can claim it. If, like this time, no snack is presented, the attack fails. Move the used card aside, and it’s now the opponent’s turn to attack.”

Sliding the card with “Treat” to the side, Elena then presented a card with the word “Trick.”

“Conversely, if the card placed face down is revealed to be a Trick card and the defending player presents a snack, the attack fails. The snack returns to their hands. However, if they did not present a snack, the attack succeeds. The attacking player successfully tricks, winning the game, and gets to give a dare to the losing opponent.”

“Is it okay to play this kind of thing at school?”

Catching the slightly dubious scent of mischief, Masachika couldn’t help but ask. In response, Elena looked towards Chisaki and said, “Well, if it comes to it, the disciplinary committee president will step in…”

“I see, that’s reassuring.”

Seeing Chisaki clenching her fist as if to say, “Leave it to me!” in response to Elena’s gaze, Masachika nodded with a serious expression.

“To sum it up, the attacking side plays either a Trick or Treat card face down. The defending side presents a snack if they think it’s a Trick card. If they think it’s a Treat card, they pass without presenting a snack.

This is done by alternating roles each turn until both players use up their cards, constituting one set. If no resolution has been reached, the cards get returned to each player, the turn order is swapped, and they proceed to the next set. The process is repeated until someone wins.”

Everyone thought for a moment at Elena’s explanation, with Yuki raising her hand after a while.

“Is the only way to win using the Trick card?”

“That’s right. Even if your stock of snacks reaches zero, the player who successfully tricks wins.”

“One more thing… what happens to the snacks if you win the game?”

“Since winning with the Trick card doesn’t involve the transfer of snacks, the player retains the snacks they already have. Winning the game doesn’t mean you can take all the opponent’s snacks or anything like that.”

“…I see.”

Understanding, Yuki nodded and withdrew her hand. Now, it was Masachika’s turn to ask Elena a question.

“Since there’s only one Trick card per player, when both players use up their Trick cards, the remaining turns are just a formality, right?”

“That’s correct. In that case, we cut the remaining turns and move on to the next set.”

“By the way, if the attacking player succeeds with their Trick, does the turn pass to the defending player?”

“It doesn’t. There are no draws.”

“I see. Got it.”

“E-Eh? Wait a minute~. How are the both of you so quick to understand?”

Maria, seemingly struggling to keep up, let out a pitiful voice as she looked around. Noticing that not only Masachika and Yuki but also the others donned expressions of understanding, Maria uttered a forlorn

“Eehh?”

Ayano had remained expressionless, and Chisaki nodded throughout the explanation.

Still, Maria seemed to think she was left behind, and in a fluster, counted something mysteriously with her fingers.

“Wait, wait. U-Um, so, each person has four cards, one Trick card and three Treat cards. The person who uses the Trick card successfully wins, right? And to defend against the Trick card, you can present a snack, but if it was a Treat card instead, you lose your snack, so you should only present a snack when you think the attacking player has presented a Trick card. On the other hand, the attacking player should play the Trick card when they think the opponent won’t present snacks…

And then, you take turns doing that, using up all the cards, and once you’ve used them all, you reset by returning the cards and starting again…”

She bent her fingers one by one, as if confirming the rules, eventually folding all the fingers on both her hands.

“?”

Yet Maria tilted her head.

And at the same time, Chisaki, who had been nodding with a convinced face, also tilted her head.

You didn’t get it!? You still didn’t understand after all that!?

While inwardly commenting on Maria’s confusion, Masachika observed Elena, who had lightly stumbled before speaking up with a half-smile.

“Well, well, let’s show you an example first. We’ll do a one-on-one

match, and we'll keep playing until we have a winner! The winner will receive…"

At that moment, Elena grabbed the stem part of the Jack-o'-lantern placed in the center of the long table and lifted it.

The lid around the stem came off, revealing a yellow pudding inside.

"This! A special giant pumpkin pudding weighing two kilograms!!"

"Eh? I don't want that."

"Don't say you don't want it!!"

Masachika inadvertently spoke honestly, prompting Elena to scold him. However, he genuinely didn't want it. Moreover, he doubted whether he could finish it in the first place, even if he split it among the eight people present.

No, I take it back. Some people here seem like they could finish it.

Noticing Alisa next to him, Maria next to her, and Ayano across from him with sparkling eyes, Masachika squinted his eyes.

"Seriously…"

Or rather, I guess this is why I received a text message yesterday to 'put the Jack-o'-lantern in the refrigerator…'

He had felt that it was strangely heavy, and he had noticed that the top of it had been carved out to become a lid, but he never expected a tightly packed pudding inside. He had thought it was just a selection of sweets at best. However, he did wonder why there was no sound of something rustling inside when he tilted it.

"Okay, then let's determine the pairings with a lottery!"

"You're really well-prepared."

Looking at the whiteboard with a lottery system drawn on it, Masachika smiled wryly. Then, after taking turns to determine the pairings, the result was—

⋆･☆･⋆

Quarterfinals Match 1: "Illegal Girl" Elena vs. "Cult Priest"

Masachika

“So I’m officially ‘Illegal Girl’ now… Well, whatever.”

Seeing the matchup chart Yuki had drafted on the whiteboard, Elena made a subtle expression in reaction to the nicknames written.

However, after exhaling lightly, she changed her expression and flashed a confident smile at Masachika.

“*Fufufu*, to think I’d face Kuze-kun first… Pity yourself for having to face me right at the beginning.”

“That’s true. You’re already a step closer to the giant pumpkin pudding that’s a pain to carry back, are you?”

Casually exchanging jabs with words, they moved to the couch seats and sat facing each other.

“Ah, to prevent cheating, spectators, please watch from a position where you can’t see our cards, okay?

Following Elena’s words, the remaining six arranged chairs on both sides of the table and took their seats.

Satisfied with the arrangement, Elena sent a provocative glance towards Masachika. “Well then, since I’m the creator of the game, why don’t you go first. It’ll be fairer then.”

“Are you sure? Don’t bark when you lose later.”

“*Ahaha*, if I lose, I’ll declare my defeat while lifting my skirt as a defeated magical girl.”

“…Is that really okay? I have absolutely no interest in Elena-senpai’s panties, but since you’ve already declared that, you’ll have to do it, okay?”

“What a rude junior!”

Even when scolded in that manner, Masachika couldn’t help that he wasn’t interested. Besides, at this point, Elena’s large chest was already visible to an astonishing degree. It was surprising that he felt nothing about it even to himself.

Why is that? It’s strange… even though she’s so beautiful. Maybe it’s because of that disappointing beauty[4] aura that always surrounds her?

“I feel like you’re thinking something incredibly rude right now…”

To Elena, whose cheek twitched as she keenly read his thoughts, Masachika raised the corner of his mouth smugly.

In response, Elena’s cheek twitched even more as she declared with a slightly creepy smile,

“I’ll definitely make you cry…!”

“I won’t cry even if I lose badly. I don’t know if that’s going to be the case for Elena-senpai, though.”

After another round of exchanging jabs at each other, Masachika switched his thoughts.

In a game like this… there’s one thing I must consider first.

That is whether his opponent’s goal is to win the game or to get his snacks.

If it was the latter, his opponent’s strategy would be apparent.

They would refrain from offering any of their own snacks, continuously play Treat cards, and strategically lose when appropriate.

That’s the best option if that’s their goal. And if the opponent intends to do that, playing a Trick card in his first turn would easily lead to victory.

Well, that’s unlikely in her case. After boasting so much and being provoked by me, she’s definitely gunning for the win, no matter what.

Actually, the purpose of exchanging jabbing words with her just now was to discern that.

So, if Elena genuinely intended to win, playing the Trick card in the first round would be quite risky. If he fails, it would result in a defensive battle for the remaining turns, but more importantly, playing the Trick card first means abandoning the chance to get her snacks during that turn.

In this game, where snacks are used to defend against the Trick card, having less, or even none, would render you unable to defend against it.

Considering not only the victory in this match but also the next, it would be smart to have as many snacks in hand as possible.

Of course, there is a trade off for utilizing such a risky move to uncover her strategy… Well, for now, let's just see how things go.

Making a calm judgment, Masachika placed a Treat card face down on the table.

"Oh, you've decided, huh…? Well then, I'll play my hand too."

Saying that, Elena placed her financiers on the paper plate in the middle of the table.

"*Hmm?* You were talking big, but you seem quite cautious.

Building a solid defense right from the first move."

"The first move is just to see how things go. Consider it a sacrificial pawn."

Responding to Masachika's taunt, Elena answered with a defiant smile. With everyone now ready, Masachika reached for his facedown card.

"Oh, when you flip the card, make sure to shout 'Trick or Treat!'"

"……"

At the slightly embarrassing request, Masachika shrugged his shoulders. However, considering that it was for the sake of excitement, he went along with it and shouted along with Elena.

""Trick or Treat!""

With everyone's attention focused, Masachika revealed the Treat card with a bang. Amid the crowd's cheers, Masachika took the financiers that Elena had placed.

"Successful 'treat,' huh? I'll take those then."

"Go ahead, go ahead."

Elena didn't seem shaken at all, even wearing a confident smile.

Raising an eyebrow slightly at her composed demeanor, Masachika threw another jab.

“Oh, are you sure, Elena-senpai? You’ve already lost a ‘defensive unit.’ Even if you advance, won’t it be tough ahead?”

“*Hahaha*, it’s just a little handicap, no big deal.”

Maintaining her composure, Elena’s provoking expression prompted Masachika to narrow his eyes.

This girl…

As Masachika brought his conjecture closer to conviction, Elena smirked.

“Well then, it’s my turn next.”

Without any hesitation, she placed a card face down on the table.

Then, she provocatively looked at Masachika.

“So, what will you do? Guard? Or not?”

“I won’t.”

In response to Masachika’s immediate answer, Elena, seemingly caught off guard, blinked her eyes in surprise.

“…Are you sure? The match might be decided quickly then, you know?”

“In that case, I’m fine with losing, having already taken one of your snacks.”

As Masachika shrugged his shoulders and said so, Elena reached for her facedown card with slightly diminished enthusiasm.

“Then, here we go…”

And with a sly smile, along with Masachika,

““Trick or Treat!””

She flipped the card…

“Ah.”

“!”

“Ohhh!”

“Oh?”

The student council members who were watching exclaimed. On the card facing upwards was an illustration of a devil with the word

“Trick.”

“*Hahaha*~ Too bad, Kuze-kun!”

With the trick card in hand, Elena declared her victory triumphantly. Unfazed, Masachika quickly snatched the card from her hand.

“Ah—”

Caught off guard, Elena opened her mouth in surprise. The other members, excluding Yuki, blinked in confusion. In the midst of their gaze, something fell from the surface of the card that Masachika took.

What fell on the table was a thin sheet, which was transparent except for the design of a devil and the word “Trick.” Holding up the Treat card that appeared from underneath, Masachika smiled with satisfaction.

“What’s this? *Hm?* ”

“Ah, u-um…”

“Cheating…?”

“Vice-President…”

Masachika’s inquiry prompted Elena to conspicuously shift her gaze, eliciting sharp looks from Chisaki and an incredulous stare from Touya. Alisa and Ayano, now grasping the situation upon Masachika’s words, directed cold glares at Elena as well. Unable to withstand these gazes, Elena mumbled hesitantly.

“T-Teaching one’s juniors about the harshness of the real world is part of the responsibility of a senior…”

“Even though you’re technically an adult at eighteen, being all high and mighty doesn’t quite cut it…”

Saying so with a cold look, Masachika sighed.

“*Haah*… You were strangely overconfident so I expected something like this. Placing a gimmick on top of a Treat card to make it look like

a Trick one… If I had played along with your plans and presented a snack, you planned to pull the card to the edge of the table while flipping it, dropping the gimmick to display the Treat card underneath, right?"

"*Uuu…*"

"Well, you might have fooled an amateur… but you picked the wrong opponent this time."

Smirking with triumphant satisfaction, Masachika slid the gimmick on the table towards Elena.

Masachika, an otaku, was always prepared for games involving consequences, so this level of cheating fell within his expectations.

"Then… Shall we have you fulfill your earlier declaration?"

"*Uuu.* "

Under Masachika's derisive smile, Elena showed signs of distress but grabbed her skirt and stood up.

"*Uuu…* Do I really have to do it?"

Looking at him with puppy eyes, Elena asked hesitantly. Holding the dubious cross hanging from his chest, Masachika responded with a solemn expression.

"Confess your sins and seek forgiveness from God."

"Can't you stop acting like a holy man even though you're cosplaying as an evil cultist?"

"Cultist, you say? Insulting my god, who forgives all with just a flash of a pair of panties!"

"What an evil god."

"My god has spoken… 'There is nourishment only to be gained from the spectacle of a confident beautiful girl's face contorted in shame.'"

"What an evil god!"

When Elena pointed this out, Masachika stopped his act. With a nonchalant attitude, he glared at her.

“Fine, fine. Let’s just keep our own promises, okay~? Consider yourself lucky we’re not confiscating your sweets. Don’t worry, both the president and I will look the other way.”

“*Uuuuuu~~~*”

Receiving Masachika’s gaze, Touya also turned around.

But even so, it seemed intensely embarrassing for Elena to lift her skirt in front of her juniors, scratching her head in embarrassment

“Um, Elena-senpai? You don’t have to force yourself…”

“No, no, Masha-senpai, this is a promise. As a respectable senior, let’s have her show that she can keep her word, shall we?”

“*Uuuuu~~!* ”

Maria’s attempts to offer a lifeline with a frowning expression were firmly stopped by Yuki with a resolute ladylike smile. Alisa and Chisaki had indescribable expressions, but both of them disliked cheating, so they watched silently. Touya, who had been destroyed at various games in a similar matter by Elena during his freshman year, remained silent. Ayano was indifferent.

And so, with no one left to support her, Elena, as if determined, revealed a sly smile at the corner of her mouth.

“*Fu-fufu*… Fine… I’ll show you guys the admirable side of a former vice-president…!”

Then, lifting her skirt with a bang, she declared with a bright red face and a strange laugh.

“I-I am a cheating loser who shamefully lost. Please, witness the pathetic appearance of this defeated loser.”

Remaining turned away, Masachika showed a slight appreciation for Elena's attempt to repent. Then, he suddenly muttered, a thought occurring to him.

"Oh, by the way, can I make her do a dare now since I won?"

"Are you a demon…?"

In response to Masachika's brutish remark, not only Touya but also the girls gave him cold stares. Feeling it on his back and cheeks, Masachika shrank his neck.

Quarterfinals Match 1 Winner: "Cult Priest" Masachika (Advances with four snacks). Dare content: Having a finger run down the loser's spine.

⋆･☆･⋆

Quarterfinals Match 2: "Mad Scientist" Chisaki vs. "Holy Demon"

Maria.

"*Ahaha*, I'm a pathetic loser… a damn pathetic loser…"

Casting a slightly sympathetic glance at Elena, who wore a vacant smile in the corner of the student council room, Masachika glanced back towards the whiteboard.

"What the heck is a Holy Demon?"

"A combination of a saint and a demon…"

"Sounds like an overly excited chuunibyou[5] nickname."

After chatting with Yuki about such matters, Masachika shifted his gaze towards the next match.

Chisaki was the first to go. She pulled out her card, gauging Maria's reaction, however…

"*Hmm*~. I'll pass."

"!"

To Masachika's surprise, Maria made an unexpected aggressive move with a no-guard opening.

It seemed Masachika wasn't the only one with that impression, as both her opponent, Chisaki, and the other spectators showed expressions of astonishment. Then,

""Trick or Treat!""

Chisaki's card was revealed to be a Treat. Chisaki's attack misses, and Maria successfully pulls off a pass.

“Well, now it’s my turn～”

With a bold move right from the start, Maria attracted a slightly wary look from Chisaki. After some hesitation, Chisaki placed a madeleine in front of Maria’s card.

“”Trick or Treat!””

Amidst everyone’s attention, Maria’s card was revealed to be a Treat. Chisaki’s madeleine passes into Maria’s hands.

“I did it～”

Maria innocently broke into a fluffy smile. In the end, this exchange resulted in Maria’s complete victory. Masachika furrowed his brow at the sight of this unexpected development.

Seriously…? Is Masha-san actually some genius strategist…?

Reassessing his evaluation of her, Masachika watched Maria’s face adorned with an innocent smile. However, as the same pattern repeated for another round, Masachika realized something.

No, wait, is Masha-san just after her snacks!?

Looking at Maria, who happily smiled in front of her now five snacks, Masachika’s evaluation of Maria, which had just slightly increased, took a sharp nosedive. Judging from her expression, it seemed Maria was not fixated on winning the game. Her goal was not to achieve victory in the game, but rather to obtain her opponent’s snacks.

It appeared Chisaki had reached the same conclusion. With a subtle narrowing of her eyes, she casually played the next card. Masachika had a gut feeling that it was a Trick card.

Well, if she had no intention of giving away anymore of her snacks to her opponent, playing a Trick card right away is the correct move… or rather, the only option.

As he internally agreed with Chisaki’s move…

“Okay, guard! I’ll play Chisaki-chan’s muffin I took from earlier～”

“!?”

Masachika widened his eyes in surprise at Maria’s unexpected play. Chisaki, too, looked astonished.

Wait… So she wasn't playing for snacks!? Could it be, all of that was an act to lure her opponent…!?

While Masachika experienced intense inner turmoil, Chisaki's card was revealed. As expected, it was a Trick card. With this, Chisaki lost her offensive move. Moreover…

How troubling… with only one snack left and two turns remaining, she won't be able to block any Trick cards.

In this situation, the probability of her losing seemed to be a simple fifty-fifty chance at first thought. However…

Even if that's the case… there are two ways for Sarashina-senpai to lose.

Namely, a complete defeat losing all her snacks or a defeat with one remaining. These were the two options. And to avoid a complete defeat, Chisaki's next turn had only one choice: not to guard. If she did so, a complete defeat for this match could be avoided. Chisaki probably understood this. However…

"…Guard!"

Understanding it and still risking losing… Typical of Sarashina-senpai.

A move that went against the expected safe route, a move that scratches the back of her opponent's mind. Even in this situation, Sarashina did not give up on winning. Against this unexpected move, Maria's card was revealed…

"Treat. Sorry～ Chisaki-chan."

Three surprisingly successful attacks from Maria. Chisaki's last snack went into Maria's hands, and at this moment, Maria's complete victory was sealed.

Quarterfinals Match 2 Winner: "Holy Demon" Maria (Advances with six snacks). Dare content: Being tickled on the side.

⋆･☆･⋆

Quarterfinals Match 3: "The Nameless Monster" Touya vs. "Witch Girl" Yuki.

"K-Kill me…!"

Touya shifted his gaze to the whiteboard as he thought about how

cute his girlfriend was as she uttered such comments with rough breaths, her face turning bright red.

“By the way, isn’t my nickname kind of terrible?”

“Is that so? It was the first thing that came to mind…”

“…Well, whatever.”

While making an indescribable face at Yuki’s unwavering archaic smile, Touya looked down at his cards.

Seeing Chisaki’s match made it clear… The importance of snacks in this game is more significant than I expected.

As Yuki selected a card on the edge of his field of vision, Touya contemplated.

I only have three snacks, so it’s risky to use them so liberally. If there’s a difference in the number of snacks between you and your opponent, it can potentially mentally corner you, making it difficult to make rational judgments, as you slowly approach defeat.

Analyzing in this manner while looking at his three snacks, Yuki placed a card face down on the field.

“President, please.”

“Ah…”

Touya’s understanding of the game wasn’t as quick or deep as Masachika’s. However, thanks to observing the previous matches, Touya had deepened his understanding of the game to a level close to that of Masachika. Namely, players have two patterns: aiming for victory and aiming for snacks. And for the latter, playing a Trick card early is effective, but for the former, playing a Trick card early proved risky.

However…

There’s no way Suou wouldn’t have noticed that.

Spending a considerable time in this student council, Touya had realized something. Even in the present student council, composed of excellent students, Yuki and Masachika, who were the president and vice-president of the student council in junior high, clearly surpassed others in mental agility. Yuki should have reached a significant

understanding of the game long before Touya had even comprehended it. Therefore…

She should understand the risks of playing a Trick in the first round. I'll pass, then!

Deciding so, Touya shook his head left and right.

"I won't guard. I'll pass."

"Oh, is that so? Then…"

Maintaining her ladylike smile, Yuki reached for her face-down card. And…

""Trick or Treat!""

In unison with the shout, Yuki flipped the card. The revealed card was… a Trick.

"Eh?"

"*Fufu*, I apologize. It seems I've won."

Quarterfinals Match 3 Winner: "Witch Girl" Yuki (Advances with three snacks). Dare content: Having one's glasses lens touched.

"He's the type to care a lot when it comes to his glasses, huh…?"

"*Ufufu.* "

⋆･☆･⋆

Quarterfinals Match 4: "Apostate Saint" Alisa vs. "Familiar"

Ayano.

"Wait, Alisa-chan's nickname is cool."

"Sounds like another chuunibyou name…"

While Chisaki and Masachika discussed such matters, Alisa took a seat on the sofa.

"Let's have a nice match, Alisa-san."

"Yes."

Politely bowing her head before sitting on the opposite sofa, Ayano unintentionally caught her tail underneath and, lifting her hips slightly, pulled the tail out from under her buttocks. Smiling at this heartwarming sight without realizing it, Alisa had come to a conclusion similar to Touya's.

Avoid using snacks as much as possible. If the snacks you have decrease,

you'll feel mentally cornered, and losing snacks while also losing the game is a disgraceful way to lose. It should be avoided at all costs.

As a thorough sore loser, she thought about it rationally.

Simultaneously,

Above all, these snacks look so delicious, I can't be satisfied without eating all three types!

Thinking passionately as an extreme sweet tooth, she lightly shook her head from side to side and then further refined her thoughts.

However, avoiding defeat in the first round is also important. I feel bad for President. Having no opportunity to do anything must have been embarrassing.

Considering all these factors, Alisa reached a conclusion.

In order not to be swayed by the situation, I should decide my moves in advance. First turn, guard. Then, on the second turn, I'll pass!

Decision made, Alisa presented a madeleine in response to Ayano's card.

""Trick or Treat!""

And the result…

"It's a Treat. I'll take the madeleine."

"*Gh*, yes."

Regrettable, but it was within her calculations, so Alisa wasn't shaken up. Next, it was her turn.

Initiating a Trick card on the first turn is risky… and above all, even if I succeed with the Trick here, I won't be able to get the madeleine I used back…

Glancing at the madeleine that had just gone to Ayano, Alisa placed a Treat card face down.

"Please, Ayano-san."

"Yes."

Trying to not show any hints of tension on her face, Alisa stared at Ayano's unmoving expression. Then… Ayano played the madeleine she had just taken from Alisa.

"I'll guard. That's all."

"Yes, then."

With a slightly triumphant smile, Alisa reached for her card.

""Trick or Treat!""

Then, holding the Treat card facing up, she smiled contentedly.

"Treat successful. I'll take back the candy."

"Yes."

Even now, Ayano showed no change in her expression. It felt a bit ominous, but Alisa's plan remained unchanged.

Alright, I've regained the snack. As planned, let's launch a decisive attack here!

—That's what you're thinking, right?

Ayano thought matter-of-factly, in front of the secretly enthusiastic Alisa, as she read her thoughts.

Alisa-san, who is competitive and loves sweets, would want to win without losing her snacks as much as possible. Still, to avoid losing in the first round, she'll probably start with a guard. So by returning the snack she lost on the next turn…

"I'll pass."

Alisa-san will definitely make a move.

Facing the assertive expression of Alisa, Ayano, with an emotionless face, reached for her facedown card.

""Trick or Treat!""

Then, looking at the revealed card,

"Eh!?"

Alisa's expression turned dismayed.

"…Trick successful. I win."

Quarterfinals Match 4 Winner: "Familiar" Ayano (Advances with three snacks), Dare content: Having the loser's ears blown on.

⋆･☆･⋆

Semifinal Match 1: "Cult Priest" Masachika vs. "Holy Demon"

Maria.

"*Uuu…*"

"You okay?"

"So frustrating… Where did I go wrong…?"

"*Hmm…* Don't worry, I'll avenge you."

Masachika tightened his resolve as he declared to Alisa, who wore a frustrated expression while holding her ears, having had them tickled by Ayano blowing on them.

Now then… This is where it gets serious.

His opponent was Maria, who had achieved a landslide victory over Chisaki in her first match. It was unclear how much of her win was calculated, but there was no doubt that she was a formidable opponent, considering the fact that it was unknown whether her strategies were well reasoned.

More importantly… the difference in the number of snacks we have is two. Even though I can easily cut the deficit by taking one snack, her having six snacks to start with is a threat in itself…

Thinking like that, Masachika headed towards the couch seat. He then directed a vigilant gaze at Maria, who was sitting in front of him, not letting his guard down at all.

Oh, shit. This reminds me of yesterday…

Masachika quickly averted his eyes upon seeing Maria dressed in a devil cosplay in front of him. He subtly shifted his gaze towards his cards and checked the snacks they both had.

I have four. And Masha-san has six, right…? …Hm? Did I count that wrong?

Blinking a couple of times, Masachika reconfirmed that there were only three snacks on her plate. Then, he turned his gaze toward Maria with a questioning look.

"…*Ehehe♪!* I ate them."

"So you did~"

Maria had unexpectedly preoccupied herself with the snacks she gained during her first match while waiting for her second match.

"Masha…"

"Well, it's true that there's no rules against that, but Maria-chan…"

"Masha… Don't you think you're being too carefree?"

Alisa clutched her forehead as if she had a headache, Elena displayed a bewildered and wry smile, and Chisaki frowned as she retorted. Faced with lukewarm gazes from all directions, Maria said,

"But it looked so yummyyyy~" while fluttering her hands.

Witnessing her extremely relaxed demeanor, Masachika felt his tension loosen with a sigh.

No, really, how serious is she about this…?

Was she genuinely determined to win the game? Unable to read even that, Masachika picked up his cards for the time being.

"Alright, rock~paper~scissors—"

""Shoot.""

Almost unconsciously predicting that his opponent would play rock, Masachika opened his palm to play paper. Having been correct, he breathed out a sigh of relief, holding the four cards in his hand.

Now… let's see how things go with a Trick at the beginning. I'll figure out whether Masha-san dodging the Trick card from Sarashina-senpai earlier was just luck or not… Even if it means risking the match turning into a defensive battle, I fortunately have enough remaining sweets to endure.

Feeling less inclined to come up with a more complicated strategy, Masachika nonchalantly played a Trick card face down on the table.

“Please, Masha-san.”

To avoid being read and also to avoid looking directly at Maria’s face, Masachika gestured while looking at his hand.

“*Hmm*~… I’ll pass.”

Hm!?

At that moment he almost involuntarily raised his eyebrows upon hearing her voice. Stealthily raising his gaze, he saw Maria with her usual smile.

Eh? Huh? So was her guess from earlier really just a lucky one? I really don’t know at this point…

Inwardly tilting his head, Masachika reached for the face-down card.

“”Trick or Treat!””

And the Trick succeeded easily. Maria stood up and quickly cried out to Chisaki.

“Aww, Chisaki-chan, I lost~”

“Oh my… well, it can’t be helped.”

“Yeah… Ah, I’ll return your snacks back~”

Saying that, Maria pointed at her remaining snacks with her gaze, and at that moment, Masachika’s eyes widened.

Wait… was she planning this from the beginning?

From the start, did she have no intention to beat Masachika so as to return the snacks back to Chisaki…? Just how much was calculated and how much was natural?

I don’t really feel like I won…

Watching Maria push her remaining snacks onto Chisaki, Masachika couldn’t help but think that.

Semifinal Match 1 Winner: “Sinful Priest” Masachika (Advances with

four snacks). Dare content: Cat's Paw.[6]

"(Hey, big bro… didn't you kind of chicken out with that dare?)"

"(Shut up.)"

⋆･☆･⋆

Semifinal Match 2: "Witch Girl" Yuki vs. "Familiar" Ayano.

"*Fufu*, there's no need to hold back just because it's me, Ayano."

"Yes. I intend to challenge you seriously."

Facing each other, master and servant. Masachika sent an intriguing glance at this first-time showdown between partners.

Now… this is something to watch.

A duel where both contenders had three snacks. If you only consider intellect, Yuki would likely have the upper hand, but her opponent is Ayano, a servant skilled at reading her thoughts. Will Yuki successfully devise a strategy, or would Ayano see through it? In front of Masachika's watchful eyes… Yuki, who won in rock-paper-scissors, calmly revealed her cards, shuffled them haphazardly, and laid them on the table in a row before smiling at Ayano.

"*Fufufu*, I have no intention of engaging in a battle of wits with you, Ayano. From now on, I will randomly play cards while they're face down."

Seeing Yuki declare something to the tune of "I'll be seen through easily anyway, might as well leave it to chance," made Masachika feel uneasy.

That's a lie.

Although it looked like she shuffled her cards randomly, Yuki precisely knew the position of the Trick card. Naturally, Masachika thought so.

It was a bluff. Pretending that being read would be meaningless, she plans to bluff and strike with the Trick card at the opportune moment.

Now… will it work against Ayano?

Ayano, maintaining an expressionless face throughout, had thoughts

that Masachika couldn't quite grasp. But somehow, Masachika thought that… if he noticed, Ayano might have noticed it too.

Whether Masachika's prediction was correct or not, the winner wasn't decided with the first set. Both successfully guarded against each other's Trick cards, leading to the first-ever tiebreaker today.

"*Fufufu*, as expected of Ayano… you read my moves well."

"I'm humbled."

As the audience got riled up about the intense battle, the second set began. Ayano started with the first move as Yuki passed, successfully dodging Ayano's Treat card.

Then, it was Yuki's turn. Would she "randomly" shuffle the cards again and place them on the table? Unexpectedly…

"I didn't intend to use this…"

"?"

Upon murmuring that, Yuki smiled at Ayano, who wore a puzzled expression, almost as if a question mark appeared on top of her head.

"Hey, Ayano. Do you know the most effective way to deal with someone trying to read your mind?"

"…No."

As Ayano shook her head from side to side, Yuki deepened her smile.

"You know? The key is to prepare two distinct minds so that your opponent can't read either one."

As Yuki spoke, the spectators, perplexed by her words, tilted their heads.

Could it be…

Just as Masachika's cheeks twitched from an uneasy premonition, Yuki silently formed the following words with her lips.

—Angel Mode

Without vocalizing it, she chanted next bit,

“Activate☆”

At that moment, Yuki’s expression dropped from her face, and after a few seconds, in its place, an innocent smile suddenly appeared where it once was.

“Alright then～, it’s my turn next!”

“““““““!?”””””””

Yuki’s sudden character change shocked everyone except Masachika and Ayano. As Ayano’s shoulders shook in agitation, Yuki picked up a card.

“Then, I’ll go with this devil card!”

“T-That card…”

Saying that, Ayano visibly let her gaze and hand waver, hesitating before presenting a madeleine in front of her. Then…

““Trick or Treat!””

The card was revealed, turning out to be a Treat card.

“*Ehehe*, no way～♪. I’ll take the madeleine then, okay?～”

Sticking her tongue out mischievously, Yuki snatched Ayano’s madeleine. The student council room buzzed with excitement.

In the end, completely thrown off balance, Ayano hastily played a Trick card on the next turn but failed miserably. After being hit by another Treat card, and left with only one snack, she missed on the final two choices and was decisively defeated.

“I did it! I won～♪”

Yuki rejoiced like a child in her magical girl outfit, and Chisaki seemed flustered.

“Y-Yuki-chan, are you okay? Um, should I reset you?”[7]

“There’s no need for that. That’s just her self-hypnosis—induced mental regression.”

“Is that really okay…?”

While his seniors watched with concern, Masachika approached Yuki, grabbed both her shoulders, and shook her.

“Come on, snap out of it.”

“…Ah, thank you, Masachika-kun.”

“““““““Are you sure that’s really okay?”””””””

Masachika sighed as the others expressed their worries.

Semifinal Match 2 Winner: “Magical Girl” Yuki (Advances with five snacks). Dare content: Being tickled until the loser’s expression changes.

“*Haah, haah…*”

“You… Your mischievous side has been showing its true colors for a while now.”

“Oh, really? *Ehehe.* ”

⋆･☆･⋆

Final Match: “Cult Priest” Masachika vs. “Witch Girl” Yuki.

“Well, it’s just the two of us in the end.”

“Yes, indeed. I had a feeling it would come to this.”

Masachika shrugged his shoulders while Yuki smiled mysteriously. As the others watched, Yuki calmly extended her hand towards Masachika.

“Then, will you go first? I have more snacks than you after all.”

“Heh? Are you sure?”

“Yes, besides, rock-paper-scissors would go on forever with us, right?”

After saying that much, Yuki paused for a moment and then provocatively smiled.

“I didn’t expect the final to be decided so easily in the first set.”

“*Hahaha*, I see.”

In response to Yuki’s provocation, Masachika wore a confident smile,

as the sibling showdown began.

⋆･☆･⋆

It was now the sixth set.

“*Fufufu*, this match doesn’t seem to be settling easily.”

“Well, it was within my expectations. If you’re tired, you can surrender, you know?”

“Never. But at this rate, it’s gonna drag on forever. How about this? From here on, we introduce a rule that allows a guard only once per set.”

Yuki’s proposal stirred the spectators. However, Masachika, without any sign of being shaken, nodded with a smile.

“Sure, I was thinking of making the same proposal.”

“Then—”

And so, under the newly introduced rule, the game resumed…

until the tenth set.

“Wait, it’s too long! Seriously, it’s getting too long!”

“I’m surprised that the both of you can read each other so well…”

Chisaki, expressing half admiration and half amazement, raised her voice as if she couldn’t endure it. Seeing the audience, who had gone past excitement into boredom, Masachika spoke.

“It really is getting too long. How about this, Yuki? Let’s remove the guard limit from here on, and instead, we limit our turns to only five seconds per person?”

“*Fufu*, that’s fine with me.”

“That sounds like something a shogi[8] master would say…”

As Elena sighed, the game resumed with a further rule change…

until the thirteenth set. Finally, the match was decided.

“The Trick succeeds… I win.”

Final Match Winner: “Witch Girl” Yuki (Wins with three snacks remaining).

⋆･☆･⋆

“Congratulations～”

As Masachika joined the spectators in their applause, Yuki, for some reason, wore a triumphant smile as she questioned a nonchalant Masachika, who had somehow failed to guard after taking two snacks from her.

“Did you intentionally lose?”

“No, not at all?”

Masachika replied unnaturally quickly, maintaining a poker face.

He then quickly turned his face from Yuki, who now wore an even deeper smile, and handed the snacks he won from Elena to her and the snacks he won from Yuki to Ayano.

“Here, I’m returning these.”

“Eh?”

“Masachika-sama?”

“Look, Masha-san also returned hers to Sarashina-senpai. Now everyone has three each.”

Hearing that, Elena checked the amount of snacks everyone had in surprise, while Yuki, still smiling, sarcastically remarked.

“How chivalrous.”

“I just followed the example of my respected senpai.”

As Masachika said so, Yuki chuckled and scooched around the table, sitting next to Masachika.

“Oh, by the way, I still get to give you a dare, right?”

Then, leaning forward, she whispered into Masachika’s ear.

“What? Are you blowing air on my ear—”

“WAHH!!”

“Don’t screw with me!!”

Startled by a sudden shout in his ear, Masachika collapsed onto the sofa. As he held his ringing ear, he looked up at Yuki with a twisted smile.

“You… I’ll put this witch on trial for heresy.”

“*Ohohoho*, I’ll give you a taste of your own medicine, o’ priest who worships the evil God.”

The siblings exchanged forced smiles as sparks flew in between them. Meanwhile, Elena covered half of her face with her right hand and started laughing mysteriously.

“*Fufufu*… resisting the game master’s plan to force you all to fight over snacks… Impressive, very impressive, Kuze-kun.”

“What’s she talking about?”

“Didn’t you declare yourself a pathetic loser a while ago?”

“*Ngh!* ”

At the ruthless words from Masachika and Chisaki, Elena clutched her chest, stumbling. However, she quickly composed herself, wearing a defiant smile once again.

“*Fufu, fufufu*, to you who surpassed the game master’s expectations, I must give a reward… so, here it is.”

Placing a giant Jack-o’-lantern filled with pudding on the table in front of the sofa, Elena loudly declared.

“This extra-large pumpkin pudding will be shared between Yuki-chan and Kuze-kun!”

Thrusting her hands forward, she gave a triumphant smirk, seemingly saying, “It’s settled.” In response, both Masachika and Yuki replied simultaneously.

““Eh? I don’t want that.””

“Don’t say you don’t want it!!”

—In the end, the extra-large pumpkin pudding was shared among all eight people, of which about forty percent disappeared into the stomachs of the Kujou sisters.

[1]: A children's educational program that features a singing idol. Yes, there is a hentai that unironically revolves around a trope featuring this idol and a widowed single father, I know :/

[2]: It's common to refer to people by their positions, even if they don't hold them anymore (in this case, Elena used to be the VP of the student council).

[3]: Financiers are small French almond cakes, while madeleines are small sponge cakes that also originate from France.

[4]: Literally translates to "disappointing beauty"(残念美女), it is a term used to describe good looking people whose behaviors are inconsistent with their appearance.

[5]: Chūnibyō (中二病) is a Japanese colloquial term typically used to describe early teens who have grandiose delusions, who desperately want to stand out, and who have convinced themselves that they have hidden knowledge or secret powers. It translates to "middle-second syndrome" (i.e., junior high second-year), and is also known as 8th-grade syndrome.

[6]: Having someone clap at a random moment in front of your face, potentially making you jump. (TN courtesy of KayL)

[7]: Reference to when Chisaki "resetted" Alya and Masha when Masachika and Yuki couldn't break their state of hypnosis in a previous volume.

[8]: Japanese chess.

Chapter 7 - Music

The day after the so-called post-sports festival celebration party, which happened to be Halloween themed, Masachika headed towards the music room to fulfill his promise with Elena.

She had requested him to participate in the wind orchestra's performance as an accompanist. This was in return for her cooperation during the sports festival's horseback competition. To fulfill this request, Masachika decided to join the wind orchestra's practice starting today.

Of course, due to his responsibilities in the student council, he couldn't attend every day.

"It's not like every piece needs the piano, and Kuze-kun is skillful enough to skip a few practices, right~?"

Remembering his senior who laughed with mysterious trust in him, Masachika felt his stomach tighten slightly.

Well, about that… I've been slacking off for years and gotten rusty. Besides, I don't even have a piano at home now, so I can't practice there either. Well, I've been practicing the movements at least.

The weight of such expectations pressed down on his shoulders, making Masachika's steps sluggish as he headed to the music room.

However, even if he slowed down as he walked, he'd still eventually reach his destination.

Now in front of the first music room, Masachika took a deep breath and opened the door with determination.

"Excuse me—"

"Welcome to my harem!"

"…Are you really okay with that sort of introduction?"

At the sight of Elena welcoming him in such a manner, Masachika threw a deadpan retort. In response, Elena confidently puffed out her chest.

"*Fufu*~ No problem at all! Because it's the truth. Right, guys?"

Saying that, Elena turned around to garner agreement from the wind orchestra members.

"Yes, President."

"That's right."

"*Ufufu*."

Witnessing the scene of beautiful smiles and exemplary courtesy, Masachika recalled what Elena had told him before.

"This school is full of gentlemen and ladies who graciously overlook

silliness, so I usually end up having to play the straight man.

Finding someone whom I can comfortably be the funny man is quite rare."

I see. So this is what Elena-senpai meant by refined students who smoothly ignore her jokes with smiles.

Looking around, most of the wind orchestra members (mostly girls), had an atmosphere that suggested they were well-bred children of good families. It was a lineup that exuded similar auras to Yuki in her ladylike mode.

Certainly, this is quite the funny man killer…

Having seen Elena's jokes being smoothly ignored to this extent, Masachika sympathized with her. However…

"See? Everyone here is a part of my harem!"

Elena declared with a triumphant smile.

"Aren't you being too resolute?"

Masachika was both exasperated and impressed by Elena's skit, as she turned around with a smile and thumbs up, before placing her hands on her hips as she laughed.

"*Ahaha*, well, if you're going to be the master of a harem, you have to be resolute in various ways, right~? Right guys?"

"Yes, President."

"That's right."

"*Ufufu.*"

"No, seriously, you're going overboard… How long do you plan to keep up that setup?"

"Don't call it a setup!"

"Then that character."

"You're so noisy! If you don't act like a distinct character, you'll never be able to stand out!"

"That's… I'm sorry."

“Don’t apologize! It’s just a joke. Elena-senpai has always been a reckless and naughty onee-san☆”

With a bright smile and a pose that seemed to be accompanied with the sound effect “*cha-ha*☆,” Masachika was now even more impressed with how well Elena maintained her act. At the same time, he realized the oppressive tension he had felt on his shoulders before coming here had dissipated. With a wry smile, he lowered his head.

“Thank you for helping ease the atmosphere so that I can quickly fit in.”

“Don’t thank me!!”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t act all formal! Our club has a casual atmosphere.We don’t care about hierarchy, right guys?”

“Yes, President.”

“That’s true.”

“*Ufufu.*”

“Are they bots?”

Masachika looked at the club members who had been repeating the same lines with serious expressions, but all he received in return were impervious unaffected smiles. At this point, it began to feel a bit intimidating.

Or rather, it’s like she’s addicted to being an eccentric character…

Upon closer inspection, there were only three people who consistently involved themselves in this gig of hers, with the other members just silently smiling. For now, Masachika decided to label these three “Yes-senpai,” “That’s right-senpai,” and “The giggling one.”

“Well then, once again, it has been decided that Kuze Masachika-kun will participate as our accompanying pianist for the December concert. Everyone, please give a round of applause!”

As Elena said that and applauded, all the other members followed suit as they applauded in unison. They displayed no signs of dislike or avoidance towards him as an outsider, expressing only purely welcoming feelings.

Masachika felt relieved at this, but at the same time, he couldn't shake the butterflies in his stomach, interpreting their gazes as an expectation of good performances from him.

"All right! So, I'd love to have us do self-introductions in order from *that end*… but doing it for everyone would take too long, so let's save that for another time, maybe during break. For now, let's have our representatives from each grade introduce themselves, okay?"

"Ah, yes. Please."

"Okay, come on~!"

As Masachika nodded, Elena made a mysterious beckoning gesture, and three female students stepped forward. They were the same three who had been repeating the lines from earlier.

Ah, so she's 'The giggling one.'

Feeling a bit awkward having given them such nicknames just a while ago, Masachika realized that the three girls were going to introduce themselves as grade representatives of the club.

"Nice to meet you. I'm the vice-president, Hitani, a third year. I play the clarinet."

Yes-senpai.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Souma from the second year. I play percussion."

That's right-senpai.

"Nice to meet you, Kuze-san. I'm Arai from Class A. I play the flute."

I got it wrong, so she's the " ara-ara *" type, not the "* ufufu *" type.* [1]

Such ridiculous thoughts crossed his mind, so he mentally slapped himself. Then, Masachika put on an earnest expression and gave a respectful nod.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Kuze. I'll be here for only a little over a month, but I look forward to working with you—"

"Too stiiiiiff!"

Interrupting him, Elena swung her arm dramatically between

Masachika and the three girls. Then, she gave a sharp gaze to the surprised Masachika.

“Didn’t you hear what I was talking about earlier!? We have a casual atmosphere where we don’t care about hierarchy or formalities in our club!”

“Well, even if you say that’s the case, today is my first time participating… Besides, everyone is using honorifics and formal language, so for me to—”

“These girls use polite language with everyone! More importantly, Kuze-kun, be more casual with me like you are when we’re alone!”

“Well… that’s what your guys’ club president is saying, but are you guys okay with that?”

“Yes.”

“That’s fine with me.”

“*Ufufu.*”

Obtaining their approval (?), Masachika relaxed his shoulders a bit. Elena, satisfied with their responses, put her hand on Masachika’s shoulder.

“Well then, let’s have you start with a song right away.”

“Eh?”

“As a way of introducing yourself, you know? Everyone wants to hear you play, right?”

In response to Elena’s question, not only did the usual three girls agree eagerly, but the entire club. Facing the pressure of such expectant gazes, Masachika nodded.

“Uh, then… just one song.”

A light cheer erupted in response to his words. Trying to resist the sensation of his cheeks twitching under their innocent expectations, Masachika took a seat at the piano.

Hmm, I didn’t expect to be playing a solo right away… What should I play?

On the list of pieces to be performed, sent by Elena in advance for the concert, were various songs ranging from famous orchestral pieces to more recently popular J-POP, and even the theme songs of a few anime. Thinking about those songs, Masachika chose an anime theme song for now, intending on getting the audience excited. While lightly humming the tune, he moved his fingers on his thigh before shifting them towards his keys. And then—

Huh? But why am I playing?

His fingers froze.

Why play, and for whom? Of course, for Elena and… for the wind ensemble club.

But why?

What do you mean why?

In response to his own inner question, Masachika questioned himself and realized.

Ah, I see. I don't have a motive.

Masachika lacked the motivation to showcase a performance to Elena and the members of the wind ensemble club. While he had a passive reason due to his promise, he lacked any active motivation.

Maybe that's why his fingers… wouldn't move.

No, no. Whether I have the motivation within me or not, I still have to play…

Despite thinking so, his fingers still wouldn't move. His vision blurred as the keys in front of him turned fuzzy, picturing his mother's gaze at the back of his mind. Her resentful eyes glaring at him…

H-huh? Where's the C key again? Where do I start playing from…

There was a ringing in his ears, and his consciousness was dragged into the memories of that day—

"Ah, right."

As Masachika's fingers remained frozen on the keys, Elena's voice reached his ears. Startled, he looked up, and Elena, who had put her hand on her forehead, shook her head.

“Geez, what am I doing… You gotta follow the principle of performing yourself first before asking someone else to perform, after all… That’s right, it must be awkward for Kuze-kun if he doesn’t know how our usual performances sound.”

“Elena-senpai…”

And with a theatrical tone, Elena turned back to the club members.

“So… let’s make today a chance for Kuze-kun to get to know us first! Kuze-kun, you can just watch from there～.”

Following Elena’s lead, Masachika hesitantly took a seat on the chair near the wall. The club members, somewhat bewildered by the sudden change in direction, followed her instructions.

“Now, let’s start without worrying about our guest～. As usual. Oh, Sensei, could you conduct for us? Senseei～?”

“*Fwah!* ”

In response to Elena’s call, a woman who had been dozing off by the window snapped awake.

Oh, so she’s the advisor, after all… I wasn’t sure because no one mentioned it…

Since Masachika had arrived, he had noticed the woman leaning against the wall and sleeping. She seemed to be the advisor. The woman, who appeared to be in her thirties, stood up while clutching the back of her neck and glanced around to find her conductor’s baton.

“Ah～ alright… I wasn’t sleeping. Definitely wasn’t sleeping…”

“No, you were definitely sleeping.”

“No～? I wasn’t sleeping. Right?”

“Yes, sensei.”

“That’s right.”

“*Ufufu.*”

“See?”

“Come on, everyone is spoiling Sensei too much.”

“Yes.”

“That’s right?”

“*Ufufu.*”

As the club members smoothly brushed off everything with smiles, Masachika observed the woman, who was yawning while searching for the conductor’s baton.

No, is she actually their advisor…? I don’t remember seeing her around the school… Could she be an external instructor?

As Masachika speculated, the woman finally found her conductor’s baton and tilted her head when she noticed Masachika.

“*Hm?* We have an observer today? At this time of the year?”

“Sensei… We talked about this the other day, right? We’re scouting a pianist for accompaniment.”

“Really? *Hmm~…?* ”

The woman furrowed her brow as she glanced at Masachika, who returned a nod. However, before Masachika could react even further, she shifted her gaze away and turned towards the club members. And when she raised her conductor’s baton, the relaxed atmosphere in the music room immediately turned tense.

“!”

Masachika involuntarily straightened his posture, as if compelled by the tension that filled the room. Right after, the baton was waved, and a wall of sound struck Masachika.

Uh, woah…!

Listening to a performance of this scale in such a small room at such a close distance was an entirely different experience from concerts in a hall. Overwhelmed by its power, Masachika felt his spine straighten involuntarily.

This is amazing… Elena-senpai looks cool too…

The ensemble, a perfect harmony of all the instruments present, was

punctuated by the brilliant high notes of Elena's trumpet.

Amazing…!

Overwhelmed by the powerful performance, Masachika closed his eyes, immersing himself in the soundwaves As the piece concluded, he found himself clapping spontaneously. Elena and a few others looked pleased, but their expressions quickly shifted as the teacher signaled the start of the next song. At that moment, it was evident to Masachika that only those who poured passion into their music had gathered here.

Woah… so cool.

Masachika genuinely felt that. Simultaneously, *Can I… fit in here? Among these people?*

Could he, someone who left everyone expressionless with his performances, fit in? Someone who lacked passion for music? Someone who still couldn't shake off that past?

……

Out of place.

Masachika continued to listen to the wind ensemble's performance as these thoughts continued to silently brew in his mind.

⋆·☆·⋆

"Alright, that's it for today. Dismissed!"

"""""""Thank you very much!"""""""

As the club's activity reached its end, the woman who had been conducting swiftly packed up her belongings and left, giving off an impression that said, "Ah~, I'm tired." Her abrupt departure left Masachika dumbfounded.

"…She's quite something."

"Ahaha, I'd understand why you'd be surprised at first. Despite her appearance, she's a pretty famous musician. Oh, by the way, she's an alumna of our club, Susume-sensei. You could call her an 'OG.'

"That's quite… an unusual name."

“Yeah, right? So, how was it?”

In response to Elena’s question, Masachika honestly praised the performance.

“It was amazing. I’ve never listened to a wind ensemble up close like this, and I was overwhelmed.”

“*Fufuun*～ That’s right. We’re pretty good.”

Elena puffed out her chest proudly, and Masachika gave a slight bow.

“Also… thank you. For helping me out.”

“*Hm?* Ah…”

After a moment of thought, Elena realized Masachika was referring to when he froze at the piano, giving him a nod.

“You seemed troubled… or rather, lost. I just jumped in on impulse. I hope I wasn’t meddling or anything.”

“Meddling? Not at all… I appreciated it.”

“*Mm*…”

At that moment, Elena glanced at the club members behind her before quietly asking Masachika.

“So, do you think you’ll be able to participate in our practice next time?”

Expressing gratitude in his gaze in response to Elena deliberately not asking for details, Masachika nodded vaguely.

“Well, I think I’ll be fine, but… what happened just now, it’s just that…”

He hesitated for a moment and then chuckled awkwardly.

“I mean… I kinda lost sight of why I was here playing the piano…”

Masachika dropped his gaze, immediately feeling embarrassed the moment the words of confession left his mouth. However, Elena, with a slightly widened gaze, leaned in before Masachika and nodded approvingly.

“Oh, so Kuze-kun is the type who needs a reason~ Music isn’t your goal, but rather a means to an end, huh?”

Elena’s surprising understanding prompted Masachika to lift his face, revealing a side he had unknowingly hidden. Accepting her words wholeheartedly, he agreed.

Music as a means to an end. That was accurate. For Masachika, the piano had been nothing more than a means to please his family…

and the person he loved. He had only learnt and played it because it made his mother and sister happy. Come to think of it… he might have never played music just for the sake of music.

“…Someone like me doesn’t really fit in the wind ensemble club, huh?”

A somewhat sarcastic smile crept out onto his lips, as self-deprecating words spilled out of his mouth. Although he immediately regretted it, all Elena did was casually raise an eyebrow.

“*Hm?* But it’s not like that at all?”

Contrary to his expectations, Elena’s light denial left Masachika deflated.

“People have different motivations~. I’m the type who thinks enjoyment is the most important, but there are those who passionately just focus on winning competitions, you know?”

“Yeah…”

After giving a vague response to Elena’s words, Masachika became curious about why she had recruited him in the first place.

“Then, why did Elena-senpai recruit me? If enjoying music is most important for you… who you play alongside shouldn’t matter much, right?”

“*Hm?* Well, because I felt that with Kuze-kun, a new type of music could be born? Ah no, sorry. That sounded a bit pretentious.”

Immediately retracting her statement, Elena twisted her head a bit and continued.

“Well, in simple terms… I just thought, ‘Ah, I want to perform with him as our accompanist,’ when I heard Kuze-kun’s performance.

That's all."

Saying so, Elena shyly chuckled. Then, looking up at Masachika's face, she added,

"So, well… do as you like, okay? I do whatever I want too. Just play the way you want to play, don't feel pressured… Though, I guess that might be difficult."

Standing up, Elena confidently spoke with a bright smile.

"The characters that make up the word 'music' can be used in the phrase 'enjoying the sound.'[2] In other words, it's all about you enjoying it."

"……"

"You thought that line just now was super cliché, right?"

"…Well."

"Shut up! Hall-of-fame worthy quotes like that aren't easy to make up on the spot, you know!?"

Smiling wryly at his irritated senior, Masachika stood up and tried to escape from Elena's wrath.

Before barely swallowing the words that were about to come out of his mouth, "Is music really that enjoyable?"

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"Well then, excuse me."

"Sure, see you next week!"

Exchanging farewells with the members of the wind ensemble club, including Elena, Masachika left the music room. Closing the door and turning his gaze down the hallway, he spotted a male student leaning against the wall, arms crossed. Despite Masachika's attempts to walk by without establishing eye contact, he was inevitably approached.

"So, you joined the wind ensemble after all, Kuze."

"Why are you here? Bored?"

Not bothering to face Yusho, Masachika only directed his gaze

towards him and asked. Yusho, in a needlessly pretentious manner, shrugged his shoulders.

“Thanks to a certain someone, the piano club is on the verge of disbanding with a drastic decrease in members. So I’m not exactly bored, but I do have a lot of time.”

“Well, that’s entirely on you for messing up. Unfortunately, unlike you, I’m busy. Later.”

Saying that much, Masachika tried to leave as Yusho began to say something else, as a familiar figure emerged from a nearby door.

“Oh, what a rare combination we have here.”

“Nonoa…”

Seeing Nonoa come out of the second music room, Masachika realized that today was a practice day for the light music club. He noticed Sayaka, who came to observe, peeking from behind Nonoa.

“Done with practice?”

“*Hm~?* Well, yeah. We’re gonna chat for a bit and head home after packing up, I guess?”

“I see.”

Curious about Yusho’s reaction, someone who had labeled Nonoa as a dangerous person, Masachika turned around… only to find no one there.

“Huh?”

“If it’s about Yusho, he left just now in a hurry~. Probably to avoid me because he hates me~.”

“Ah, right… What did he come here for, anyway?”

Slightly taken aback by Nonoa’s casual comments, Masachika muttered, and Nonoa, with a careless tone, replied.

“Who knows? Maybe he came to listen to Kuzecchi’s piano performance?”

“Huh? No, surely not…”

Instinctively about to deny it on the spot, Masachika reevaluated the situation, “Maybe that’s actually the case,” and felt a sense of disgust.

Eh? What? Is that guy really that fixated on me…? It’s pretty annoying if that’s the case…

Frowning at the unpleasant thought of being sought out by someone he would rather avoid, especially a guy, Masachika shook his head as if to dispel such thoughts. Then, he remembered something he needed to tell Nonoa.

“Oh right, I heard you accompanied Alya to the infirmary the other day? Thanks for that.”

In response to Masachika’s gratitude, Nonoa tilted her head slightly before casually replying.

“It’s not a big deal. I just dropped off the unwell-looking Alisa at the infirmary before leaving immediately.”

“I see. No, you still helped her in the end. By the way…”

Glancing around, Masachika lowered his voice before asking.

“(Do you know why exactly Alya wasn’t feeling well?)”

While Alisa didn’t disclose the exact cause, Masachika suspected that she might have been upset by someone’s comments on their election hopes.

In fact, Masachika had heard that some enthusiastic supporters of Yuki, who defeated Alisa in the horseback competition, had resorted to relentlessly criticizing Alisa. Furthermore, they considered Masachika, who had previously partnered with Yuki during junior high, a traitor.

Although Masachika had brushed off their comments with his usual casual attitude, he couldn’t help but deny feeling a chill sense of anger.

If someone has been saying nasty things about Alya to the point of making her feel unwell… I’ll never forgive them.

While waiting for a response with simmering displeasure, Masachika unfortunately saw Nonoa shaking her head.

“Sorry. Alisa already looked unwell the moment I came across her,

you know~? I didn't witness anything before that~.

"I see… Well, you don't need to apologize. Thanks… and sorry."

"For what?"

"Well…"

If asked what he was apologizing for, it was an apology for momentarily suspecting Nonoa, who had recently become very cooperative, of being the culprit based on Yusho's comments. However, he couldn't say that to her face.

Masachika then mumbled some vague words, and then, he thought about asking the question he had barely stopped himself from asking Elena earlier to Nonoa.

"Ah, right~… Is being in a band fun?"

In response, Nonoa wore a puzzled expression, perhaps perplexed by the sudden change of subject, but she nodded easily.

"Yeah~, singing feels good~, so I guess it's fun?"

"I-I see…"

So Nonoa also enjoys music. It was a casual and normal answer, yet such a fact was surprising and somewhat shocking to Masachika at the same time.

Even Nonoa enjoys it… Yet, I…

Seeing Masachika feel ever more down, Nonoa became even more puzzled as she lightly swayed her body.

"Are you done? I wanna go to the restroom."

"*Ueeh!?* I-I see. Sorry, go ahead."

"It's fine…"

Saying that, she took a step forward.

"…Wanna come with?"

"Go with you!?"

Masachika immediately retorted to Nonoa's casually outrageous invitation. Then, he sighed lightly as he watched Nonoa walk away with a grin on her face, before heading towards the school building's entrance.

But I see… So music is fun even from Nonoa's point of view…

Such enjoyment was a sensation Masachika was unfamiliar with.

Or rather…

I've… only ever played by myself.

He had no experience with ensemble or band performances. At most, he had practiced the piano in duet with his piano teacher a few times. Whether it was enjoyable or not, he honestly couldn't remember.

Besides,

A certain memory flashed in his mind.

The memory of that day had become an enduring trauma beyond his imagination. Involuntarily, Masachika gritted his teeth, shaking his head left and right.

The more I think about it, the more doubtful I'll become if I can be of any help…

Analyzing the situation calmly, Masachika let out a sigh. What resurfaced in his mind were the words spoken by Alisa on the day he accepted Elena's request.

"I believe you're someone who can ignite their own passion to support those who are passionate."

"So… I'm sure it'll be okay. You can definitely fulfill Narahashi-senpai's wish."

"……"

He understood that Alisa had no intention to pressure him.

However, the trust that she had in him, paired with the expectations from the members of the wind ensemble club, were burdensome for Masachika at the moment.

It's true that the wind ensemble club's performance was amazing, and… if I

can be of help, I certainly want to be. But…

Even if he thought that, he wasn't sure whether he had the skills and aptitude to be of any help in the first place. At this point, he didn't even know if he could actually play the next time he attended the wind ensemble club's practice.

"This is more challenging than I thought…"

Muttering to himself as he turned the corner, he spotted Maria standing next to the shoe locker, and their eyes met.

"Oh, Kuze-kun, are you going home now too?"

"Ah, yes… Masha-san, are you waiting for Alya?"

"Yeah, she has some business in the staff room~"

"I see."

As they spoke to and approached each other, Maria casually inquired, "How was it? The wind ensemble club."

"…I only observed them today, so nothing in particular happened."

Anticipating the question, Masachika vaguely answered without broaching over the details. As he tried to head towards his shoe locker, Maria, with an innocent tone, stopped him, saying, "Ehhh~ Why? Let's go home together~ Alya-chan will be here soon, right?"

Caught by her genuinely innocent smile, Masachika inwardly chuckled.

"No, today—"

"Oh, by the way, at today's student council meeting, Chisaki-chan was so~ funny~"

T-the conversation has already started…

With great enthusiasm, Maria tried to share the events of the student council with Masachika. Faced with her pure smile, Masachika

couldn't easily say, "I'm going home." So reluctantly, he decided to accompany Maria and stay beside her.

"—So, the president said! 'This isn't the Butterfly Dream!'"[3]

“*Ahaha.* ”

Masachika casually nodded and followed Maria’s story, however…

“So… what happened at the wind ensemble club?”

“*Hm?* ”

He was suddenly hit with a change of topic, completely catching him off guard. Maria smiled affectionately at his frozen profile.

“Something happened, right? Kuze-kun, you seem a bit down.”

“……”

As Maria easily read him, Masachika found himself enveloped in a gaze that seemed to understand it all. Facing forward, he sighed and regained himself after a brief silence.

“I just realized how dedicated the members of the wind ensemble club are… so I started doubting if I could do well. That’s all.”

He conveyed only the facts without delving into details, attempting to conceal his vulnerability. Maria, sensing even things he did not mention, reached out to pat Masachika’s head. After glancing around at the surroundings, she casually tapped Masachika’s shoulder.

“Don’t be too hard on yourself, okay? The people in the wind ensemble club have been practicing for a looong time. It’s natural not to catch up with them right away.”

“Well, that’s true…”

“Yeah~ I’m sure Elena-senpai understands that too. No one would be disappointed in you for not being perfect at the start.”

“!”

Masachika’s body jerked slightly at Maria’s comment. The reassuring words, “no one would be disappointed,” resonated in Masachika’s chest like gospel. Alisa’s trust, the expectations of the wind

ensemble club—the pressures he had unknowingly piled upon himself, were suddenly being released.

So, that’s it… I was afraid of disappointing others…

Come to think of it, it had always been like this. The expectations of his grandfather, the expectations of his mother—he had always forced himself to live up to them. He had unconsciously driven himself into a corner to not betray those expectations.

Erasing the anxieties he hadn't even realized he possessed, Masachika smiled slightly. Seeing his smile, Maria also smiled, seemingly relieved.

"It's okay to not be perfect at everything. Just do your best in your own way… And even if that is still difficult, it's okay to run away. When that time comes, I'll be there to comfort you a lot."

"*Haha*… That's reassuring."

While inwardly thinking, "It would be the end in various ways if it came to that," Masachika laughed without sarcasm. And, as he relaxed his shoulders for a moment…

"By the way, Kuze-kun? Why have you been avoiding eye contact with me lately?"

Maria's puzzled question struck him heavily. Facing forward throughout the conversation, Masachika, with a single drop of sweat on his cheek, answered with an innocent face.

"No, I'm just looking in the direction that Alya will come from…"

"…Why are you so stubbornly avoiding looking my way?"

"It's not like that."

He said that as he turned around, but when he saw Maria in her uniform… he inevitably flashbacked to the drunk Maria from the day before yesterday, and he quickly re-averted his gaze.

"…Why are you looking away?"

"No, a bug just flew past me…"

"Even though it's almost winter?"

"I mean they fly even in the winter. In fact, they swarm. It's annoying, especially when you go near a body of water—"

"…Something happened the day before yesterday, didn't it?"

In the midst of trying to divert the conversation with all his might, Maria hit the mark, and Masachika stumbled over his words. Apparently sensing that this was the case from his reaction, Maria furrowed her brow.

“I knew it, something really did happen…”

“Um, well…”

When Maria had sobered up on that day, Masachika had dismissed it with a casual “You fell asleep right away after getting drunk,” and for the time being, Maria had accepted it. But somehow, it seemed that Maria felt that there was more to it, and it bothered her.

What was it? What was bothering her enough to raise this topic? As Masachika speculated, Maria, looking apologetic, explained while fidgeting with her clasped hands.

“I’m sorry about that? I usually try to avoid alcohol-laced sweets, and until now… I’ve never lost my memory because of them outside of home. But the day before yesterday, I let my guard down because Kuze-kun and Elena-senpai were there…”

While Masachika was generally relieved by the explanation, there was one thing she mentioned that bothered him.

“How many times have you lost your memory at home?”

“…A-a few times? Alya-chan got really mad at me every time…”

“What did you do?”

“W-well, I don’t remember… It seems like I get clingy with Alya-chan when I’m drunk…”

Pressing her cheeks with both hands and letting her gaze wander, Maria peeked at Masachika with an upward glance.

“So, um… I wonder if I got clingy with Kuze-kun too…”

“……”

At Maria’s question, Masachika looked upward, contemplating.

Was she… really being clingy? Well, I did feel physically entangled, but…

Being embraced around the stomach, arms, legs, pulled down onto the

sofa, and finally straddled—

"*Nnngh.* "

An indecent scene flashed in his mind, and Masachika reflexively cleared his throat. Startled, Maria became flustered.

"D-did I, after all? Did I do something!?"

"C-calm down. There are people around."

Pointing with his gaze at the students who were about to leave, Masachika warned in a subdued voice. Realizing that her voice may have gotten louder, Maria covered her mouth with both hands. While cautiously glancing around, Masachika contemplated how much he should reveal to her.

Well, maybe it's better to just be completely honest at this point…

Such thoughts passed through his mind, but he immediately dismissed them.

How can I say that!? About her becoming shirtless and straddling a guy! I can't say that!! Masha-san would overheat from embarrassment and she'd faint!!

Besides… if he were to be completely honest, then there would be questions about how she returned to her sober state from that situation.

Recalling the process of getting her to sober up, it felt like a near-death experience due to the amount of tension and guilt he felt, Masachika clenched his teeth.

I mean… it couldn't be helped. I didn't know when someone from the student council might come back again, and if someone who didn't know the situation saw it, it would only lead to misunderstandings…

Especially if it was Sarashina-senpai, I assume she would've just forcefully broken into the room and resetted me by flicking my head!

Despite making such excuses internally, Masachika still had a lingering sense of guilt. That guilt easily surpassed the guilt of lying to Maria, and as a result…

"Well, um… I was grabbed by the arm and pulled down onto the sofa? I guess we got slightly tangled up, didn't we?"

Masachika opted for a full-on diversion. After all, she doesn't remember anything, right? If he told the truth partially, he might be able to keep the rest hidden. However~, it seemed like he was a bit too naive.

"Is that… really all?"

Maria, with an unconvinced tone, questioned Masachika again.

However, even with that, Masachika's response remained the same.

"That's all. Did something happen?"

"Well, you see…"

As Masachika played dumb, Maria, glancing around while talking vaguely, lightly tiptoed and whispered into Masachika's ear, creating a makeshift barrier with her hand beside her mouth. Shyly, she spoke in Russian.

【Um, the position of my underwear… was kinda off after that.】

"!?"

【It shouldn't have become like that just from hugging normally…

Could it be that I…】

Having stepped into unexpected territory from just a single piece of evidence, Masachika, caught off guard, let his eyes wander.

"*U-uuuuu~~~*"

Maria, who had stopped tiptoeing at this point, pouted while shielding her chest with both her arms, blushing. Seeing that, Masachika knew it was over, and it was already too late.

【 *Uwaaah!* I can't marry anyone other than Saa-kun anymore!】

"Hey, wait a…"

Just as he expected a slap to his face, Maria swiftly turned on her heel and sprinted down the hallway.

【I'll definitely make you my husband!】

"What kind of cliché line is that!?"

While retorting, Masachika hastily chased after her, but Maria dashed into… the girls' restroom.

"You're surprisingly calm, huh, me?"

Thanks to that, he ended up surprisingly composed, and Masachika stood in front of the girls' restroom, delivering his retort.

Normally, wouldn't one sprint until they were out of breath in a situation like this? However, hiding was indeed more effective than recklessly running. In fact, Masachika couldn't come up with a better plan against her particularly eloquent leave-me-alone-esque declaration. The curious gazes of passersby were also uncomfortable, so reluctantly, he retreated from the front of the girls' restroom.

Well… is it really okay to just leave Masha-san like this and go home? But waiting doesn't seem like an option…

Returning to the school entrance, Masachika hesitated while alternating his gaze between the shoe lockers and the girls' restroom door. Just then, someone called out to him from behind.

"Masachika-kun…? What's wrong?"

Turning around, he found Alisa looking at him with a puzzled expression. In her blue eyes was a clear shade of suspicion, as if saying

“Were you looking towards the girls’ restroom?”

“No, I just heard a loud noise from the girl’s bathroom, so I was just checking what was up.”

Masachika casually lied with a poker face. Alisa continued to gaze at him with a doubtful look for a few seconds before scanning the surroundings.

“…Did you see Masha? She should be waiting around here…”

“Huh. Who knows…?”

Without saying such words directly, Masachika used his gaze to suggest that Masha may be in the restroom. Despite lowering the temperature of her gaze even further, Alisa turned her back to the entrance.

“Well, if you wait here, she’ll come eventually.”

“*Hmm*…”

“What is it?”

“Nothing…”

If he continued to stay here, Masha might never come out. With that thought in mind, Masachika headed towards the shoe lockers.

“Alright, see you tomorrow…”

“Eh? Let’s walk home together. I want to talk about today’s student council meeting.”

“Déjà vu…”

“?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

Shrugging his shoulders, he returned to Alisa’s side. In contrast to a few minutes ago, he now waited next to Alisa for Masha.

How did it come to this?

Tilting his head in confusion inwardly, Masachika, realizing the situation, thought of ways to subtly get out of it. However…

“How was the wind ensemble club?”

Once again, déjà vu. With a wry smile in response to the same question as her sister’s, Masachika spoke his true feelings after his discussion with Masha earlier.

“To be honest, I got a bit anxious about how much help I could be… but well, I’ll give it a try without stressing myself too much.”

“…I see.”

Perhaps sensing the honesty in Masachika’s response, Alisa lowered her eyes slightly and then faced him.

“How are the members of the wind ensemble club? Do you think you’ll get along well with them?”

“Ah… some of them were quite unique, but, well…”

Answering with a faint smile devoid of negative emotions, Masachika was taken aback by Alisa’s casual response.

“Well, I’m glad it seems enjoyable.”

These words, uttered nonchalantly from Alisa, involuntarily caused Masachika’s shoulders to twitch.

“Masachika-kun?”

Noticing that she was aware of the twitch, he averted his gaze to the distant scenery.

“……”

Alisa’s gaze pierced his cheek. Yet, he continued to feign ignorance, prompting her to let out a small sigh as she murmured.

【Honestly, he’s really just helpless.】

Her words, a mixture of exasperation and acceptance, brought both gratitude and a sense of apology to Masachika’s chest. After furrowing his brow for a few seconds, he resignedly spoke.

“To be honest… I’ve never found playing music enjoyable. ”

Alisa lifted her face, and sensing her gaze back on him, Masachika continued without looking in her direction.

“I’ve always considered the piano more of a chore than a hobby…

Whether I can enjoy it or not, I honestly don’t know. And I’ve never played music with others before.”

Choosing his words carefully, Masachika confessed his own insecurities while shrugging his shoulders. At that moment, Alisa firmly grabbed his right hand.

“?”

“Let’s go.”

Despite having Masachika’s questioning glance cast towards her, she pulled him without waiting for an answer.

“Eh? W-where?”

With no attempts at addressing Masachika’s confusion, Alisa continued to pull him along as she quickly walked down the corridor.

Eventually, under the curious gazes of passing students, they arrived at the second music room.

“Huh? Masachika and Alya-san?”

Takeshi, who had just emerged from the music room, looked at the two of them as he tilted his head. The other members of their band had dubious looks on their faces as they saw them as well. However, ignoring their questioning gazes, Alisa stopped in front of them and looked towards Nonoa, Sayaka, Takeshi, and Hikaru one by one.

“Perfect timing. Can you guys spare a little time?”

“Eh, uh, sure…?”

Glancing at the faces of the others, Takeshi answered on behalf of the group, as Alisa nodded.

“Thank you. Sorry for bothering you guys as you were packing up, but could you set up the instruments again?”

“Huh? The instruments?”

“Yes. I apologize, but can you set up your bass and keyboard too?”

“Eh, well, sure, I guess…”

With a serious expression, all of them, seemingly pressured by Alisa’s straightforward request, began preparing their instruments without a word of complaint. Although no one understood the situation, Alisa exuded an atmosphere that discouraged any questions, and they silently focused on their preparations.

“Um, we’re ready, but…”

“Thank you.”

Then, glancing at Masachika, who seemed completely clueless, Alisa boldly declared,

“This will be a one-time-only Fortitude comeback performance.

However, we’ll have double vocals with me and Nonoa-san, and Masachika-kun, you’ll be on the keyboard.”

“*Ueeh!?* ”

Masachika let out a bewildered voice at Alisa’s unexpected announcement. Drawing attention with his outburst, other members of the light music club who were still in the room gathered around, wondering what was going on.

“The song will be ‘Dreamy Phantom,’[4] okay? Well then, let’s start right away.”

“No, no, Wait a minute!”

Masachika, unable to tolerate Alisa’s pushy approach, raised his voice in protest. However, Alisa casually turned her cold gaze to his direction.

“What’s the problem? You can play it, can’t you?”

“Well, I’ve read the score and seen you guys perform if plenty of times, so I think I can, but that’s not the issue—”

“Then, get ready already.”

Cutting off Masachika’s protest, Alisa turned towards Nonoa.

Unable to follow up on that, Takeshi, holding a guitar, laughed excitedly.

“Whoa, seriously? I never thought we would perform with this lineup again.”

“Takeshi? Sorry to interrupt your excitement, but we have someone here participating for the first time, right?”

“Well, well, it’s the leader’s order. Get ready, Masachika.”

“Why are you so into this too, Hikaru!?”

“Don’t be so dull, Masachika-san. Let’s express ourselves through our instruments, shall we?”

“What’s that supposed to mean, ‘Chuunibyou’ Sayaka.”

For some reasons, the other members, now completely enthusiastic, calmly quashed Masachika’s protests. After finishing her talk with Alisa, Nonoa, holding a microphone, spoke while twirling it in her hand.

“Well~, well~, now that it’s come to this, let’s just enjoy ourselves, shall we?”

Upon hearing those casual words from Nonoa, Masachika widened his eyes. Then, he abruptly stared at Alisa’s back. And as she looked back at them over her shoulder, Alisa opened her mouth.

“Ready? Well then—”

Receiving that gaze, Hikaru struck his sticks together. Seeing that, Masachika hesitated for a moment, then decided to brace himself with a somewhat desperate determination.

Oh, well, here goes nothing! Whatever happens, happens!

In an instant, Masachika recalled the sheet music and the image of Nonoa playing the keyboard, and he started pounding the keys. The drums raced, the strings of the guitar and bass danced wildly, and Alisa and Nonoa’s double vocals soared throughout the classroom. Following their lead, Masachika activated his musical brain and fingers at full throttle.

For what purpose they were playing, for whom they were playing for —Masachika had no room to care about such things. Memories of his

past had no chance of resurfacing in this environment. What was left was a desperate, clumsy, and awkward performance.

Ah, I'm playing too harshly. What a terrible performance.

It was overwhelmingly imperfect compared to the many recitals he had participated in before. They were playing so badly that it started to become laughable in Masachika's eyes. But what was amusing was that despite their terrible individual performances, when it all came together, it somehow didn't feel bad.

Alisa and Nonoa's vocals harmonized questionably at times.

Takeshi's guitar occasionally missed some notes. Hikaru's drums had his cymbals assert themselves way too excessively, and Sayaka's bass exuded strange twangs here and there. Even the audience's participation and cheers, everything blended into a unique and unparalleled piece of music.

"*Hah-hahaha.*"

Before he realized it, Masachika was laughing out loud. It was a small, easily overshadowed laughter within the performance. However, as if she heard it, Alisa cast a fleeting glance at Masachika.

"How about it, enjoying yourself?"

In response to the question implied in that gaze, Masachika answered with a gaze filled with gratitude.

"Yeah… It's fun."

Whether she understood what he conveyed or not, Alisa cut her gaze with a small smile, turned forward, and raised her voice for the final chorus.

"Благодаря тебе , Аля." (It's thanks to you, Alya.) Whispering softly to Alisa's back, Masachika connected to the climax with a glissando[5]. Inspired by Masachika's impromptu act, the other members made their instruments resonate.

Like splashing colored paint on a blank sheet of paper, it was a laissez-faire performance that was carefree and incredibly enjoyable, all witnessed by an audience that consisted of about ten light music club members who happened to be there.

It was a one-time-only comeback performance of Fortitude, and had by no means reached the scale and perfection of their performance back in the cultural festival. Nevertheless, the first and final performance with *all six* members of Fortitude closed with an excitement that could rival that of their performance in the cultural festival.

However, a dozen or so minutes later…

Alisa and Masachika, still thrilled, decided to go home with the other members of the band. There, they discovered Maria, sitting alone with her knees drawn up, in front of the shoe locker. What happened next would lead to a very awkward situation, but that's a story for another day.

[1]: He's making a joke about her name. "Ara-ara" (あらあら) translates to "oh my" (but I chose to keep it as "ara-ara" just for this line as it's part of his joke, of which "ara" (あら) is a part of her name "**Ara**i" (あらい)

[2]: "音楽" = music. "音を楽しむ" = enjoying the sound.

[3]: Reference to Ancient Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu who one night dreamt that he was a butterfly, leading to the philosophical question of whether if he was really a man who dreamt of being a butterfly, or whether if he was a butterfly dreaming of being a man, after he had woken up.

[4]: Sayaka's original song if you couldn't remember.

[5]: A glide from one pitch to another (eg. from C4 to C5).

Chapter 8 - Friendship

"…Hey, I'm getting really nervous about this all of a sudden."

Looking at the apartment where Alisa lived, Takeshi raised his voice with a hint of unease.

Today was Alisa's birthday, and Masachika had agreed to meet up with Takeshi and Hikaru before that. He directed a skeptical look at Takeshi, who seemed restless, shaking his body and gaze.

"It's not like we're the only guests, so there's no need to be nervous."

"Well, you see, it's my first time going to a girl's house… at least as

far as I can remember."

"It's the same for me, but…"

As Masachika spoke, reminiscing, Takeshi glared at him intensely.

"Liar; you've probably been to Suou-san's house, haven't you?"

"Ah… yeah, but that doesn't count."

"No way! Stop acting like you were visiting a relative, or something!"

Relatives. The truth was beyond that; they were literally family.

Unable to reveal such a thing, Masachika shrugged. In response, Takeshi grabbed his head as if to say, "We were never comrades."

"Ah! What if I screw up somehow! Wait, is it okay for a guy to use the bathroom at a girl's house?"

"It's fine, just go ahead. Well, I understand if it feels awkward."

"*Ugh*~ It bothers me, so I'll use the bathroom at that convenience store over there. Can you watch my stuff?"

"Huh? Well, sure."

Taking Takeshi's belongings, Masachika watched him quickly head to the convenience store.

"…Was he planning to endure holding it in throughout the party?"

"*Haha*, typical Takeshi, I guess."

Exchanging a wry smile with Hikaru, they noticed a familiar pair walking towards them from a distance.

"*Hmm…?* Hey, isn't that the president and Sarashina-senpai?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, it might be."

Squinting their eyes and staring at the approaching figures, the tall figure seemed to belong to Touya, who lightly waved his hand.

Returning the gesture, it became clear that it was indeed Touya and Chisaki as they closed the distance.

Naturally, holding hands with Chisaki, Touya approached Masachika

and raised his hand.

“Yo, you’re early, Kuze. What’s up? What are you guys doing out here?”

“Good evening. Just waiting for a friend.”

As Touya and Chisaki exchanged greetings with Masachika and Hikaru, Takeshi returned from the convenience store… Seeing Touya and Chisaki, he momentarily halted.

“Oh, Maruyama, right? Nice to meet you, I guess?”

“Ah, hello… I’m Maruyama.”

Being addressed by Touya, Takeshi lowered his head with a somewhat shy demeanor. Then, discreetly approaching Masachika and Hikaru, he looked up at them.

“Dude, there’s no point in getting this nervous here before entering her house.”

“Even if you say that, that doesn’t change the fact that the literal student council president, someone of a completely higher status than me, is standing right next to me.”

“Is that so? I mean he is taller than you.”

“I’m not talking about that!”

Takeshi retorted quietly and immediately, to which Touya laughed heartily.

“*Haha*, that’s an interesting thing to say. If you wanna talk about status, Kuze used to be the vice president of the student council in junior high, you know?”

“Well, yeah, but…”

“I’m not much different compared to Kuze in terms of standing.

So don’t get nervous. Unlike Chisaki, I won’t bite.”

“I won’t bite either! I might have to make do with what’s available, though!”

“What kind of torture is that? You know what, I don’t want to know.”

Masachika couldn't help interjecting, but immediately retracted his comment after. With such a conversation, Masachika and the others headed towards the entrance of the apartment. Passing through the automatic door, they stopped in front of the intercom panel and exchanged glances.

"…You wanna call her, Prez?"

"Nah, isn't it fine if you do it? After all, you're the one closest to Kujou's sister."

The others seemed to agree, so Masachika entered her apartment's number in the intercom. After two beeps, a buzz signified the line's connection and Alisa's voice came through.

"Welcome. Please come in."

Following her voice, the door to the lobby opened. The call ended immediately, and Masachika with the others stepped into the apartment building.

"Takeshi, aren't you still way too nervous?"

While waiting for the elevator, Hikaru commented from behind, observing Takeshi, who still seemed fidgety, offering only an embarrassed smile. Even Touya, looking down at them, smiled awkwardly, then patted Takeshi on the shoulder.

"That's right, relax, Maruyama."

"Well, even if you say that, Prez… You know, Alya-san's dad is Russian, right? When you think about that, is there a chance that he might take Japanese etiquette as something rude?

"You're worrying too much, Takeshi. Her dad understands these things, so it's okay. That's what Alya said, right?"

"Well, Alya-san might say that, but… generally, fathers tend to be tough on their daughters' male friends, you know?"

Even Masachika couldn't help but freeze at those words. He instantly considered that there was a possibility of that. However, the elevator arrived at that moment, so Masachika, trying to appear calm, stepped in.

"By the way, Masachika, do you know anything about Alya-san's dad?

You mentioned meeting her mom, right?"

"I happened to meet her during the parent-teacher meetings, but honestly, I haven't met her father, and I haven't really heard much about him… I only know his name."

"How do you know his name, though?"

"*Hm*, well…"

Just as he was about to answer Hikaru's question, the elevator arrived at the desired floor, and Masachika got off after letting the others off first.

"So, which way?"

"We're currently at apartment 1, so isn't it over there?"

While following Touya and Chisaki, who figured the direction they needed to head towards, Masachika continued his explanation.

"Russian middle names are often based on the father's name. In simple terms, a son would have their father's name with 'vich' added as their middle name, while a daughter would have 'ovna' added instead[1].

Well, strictly speaking, there are some exceptions depending on the name, such as Evich, Ovich, Evna, Ovna, and so on…"

"Oh, I see… So, Alya-san's middle name is Mikhailovna, meaning her father is Mikhailo?"

"No, probably just Mikhail."

"Oh, I see."

"Well, that's the case for his name…"

At that moment, Touya and Chisaki stopped, and Masachika turned to face them. Following their gazes, he found a nameplate with the name "Kujou" displayed.

"…Ah, so I'm the first one at the door, huh?"

Prompted by his seniors' gaze, Masachika headed towards the door. Then, Chisaki spoke to Takeshi, who still seemed nervous.

"You still nervous, Maruyama-kun? It's okay. If you feel tense, just

think of them as tomatoes.”

“I feel like potatoes would fit them better[2]… Well, I’ll do my best.”

“Yeah, yeah. Doesn’t matter if it’s a homeless person, the president, or a notorious criminal, when you punch them, they’ll all splatter red equally. If you think of it that way, there’s nothing to be afraid of, right?”

“Yeah, it’s kinda scary when you say that, Sarashina-senpai.”

“Maruyama-kun… Absolute confidence in your combat abilities and the conviction that you can kill anyone anytime helps bring peace to your mind.

“It’s not like I’ve been built to be some combatant or something, so…”

Hmm～ *, the nameplate says Kujou, so that means that married Russian couples don’t have separate last names too, huh? I see～, I see～…*

Pretending not to hear the dubious conversation behind him, Masachika rang the intercom. The door opened quickly, and Alisa poked her head out.

“Welcome. Thank you for coming.”

“Oh, no, thank you for the invitation. Happy birthday, Alya.”

“Thank you.”

As Alisa stepped aside, creating space, Masachika passed by her and entered. There, at the top of the entrance stairs, was a familiar gentle woman. Alisa’s mother, Akemi… and…

No way, he’s huge!?

At the sight of a towering man standing next to Alisa’s mother, Masachika could barely hold back his astonishment.

“……”

Staring directly at him, the man had the same blue eyes as Alisa which emitted a rigid gleam. Masachika craned his neck to look at them.

He was enormous, easily surpassing 190 centimeters, possibly close to two meters. Moreover, his chest was broad, his neck was thick, and he had a sturdy jaw line. Despite having a well-structured appearance

akin to that of a famous foreign action star, his sternly pressed lips made him appear quite intimidating.

Why the stern expression? He's welcoming us… right?

As this question crossed his mind, Takeshi's earlier words resurfaced in Masachika's thoughts.

"Generally, fathers tend to be tough on their daughters' male friends, you know?"

A bead of sweat trickled down his back. At that moment, for some reason, a chibi version of Tomohisa, clad in what seemed like divine white attire, appeared in Masachika's mind.

" Ho ho ho *, don't worry, Masachika. Russians, in general, don't smile much. Even though he might look like he's frowning, it doesn't necessarily mean he's angry, you know?"*

Seriously, Gramps? And why the old-fashioned way of speaking?

While throwing a retort at the mental image of a divine Tomohisa (?), Masachika, believing those words, quickly recovered from the brief freeze and greeted Akemi with a smile.

"Pardon my intrusion. It's been a while."

"Welcome! It's been a while. Oh, you can hang your jacket over there."

"Ah, yes."

Internally, Masachika wondered, "Huh? If I'm taking it off here, was buying a suit jacket really necessary?" Nevertheless, he hung his jacket on the coat rack. After putting on the slippers provided by Akemi, he closed the door, as Alisa stood next to Akemi.

"Let me introduce them. This is my mother, and this is my father."

"I'm Akemi. Nice to see you again. Oh, and this is my husband, Mikhail."

Upon Akemi's introduction, Alisa's father, who had maintained a stern silence with an iron expression up til that point, opened his mouth.

"…Welcome."

Uttered in a low voice, this single word carried a slight awkwardness. His expression remained stern, his frowning face remaining resolute.

Is he not angry…? Really? Seriously?

Not only Masachika, who was bewildered by the contrast between such a mild-mannered wife and a standoffish husband, but everyone seemed to respond hesitantly to Mikhail's greetings with words like "Ah, thank you…" or "Excuse me…" It was clear that everyone was shrinking back in the face of Mikhail's intimidating posture.

"(…It's fine; I can take him on.)"

On the other hand, Masachika heard a disturbing murmur from Chisaki, who had been quietly observing Mikhail next to him. However, Masachika pretended not to hear it. Surely, she was probably just telling him to smile and say hello.

"Let me introduce you. This is Kuze-kun. He sits next to me in class and is my partner for the student council election."

"Ah, hello."

After Alisa's introduction, Masachika greeted Akemi again. Then, mustering up his determination internally, he stood before Mikhail.

Mikhail, in turn, silently looked down at Masachika.

"……"

No, seriously, he's scary!

Perhaps due to Alisa's introduction as "my partner," Masachika felt that the intimidating aura that exuded from Mikhail had increased…

or so he thought.

Still, maintaining a smile on the surface, he delivered a safe greeting, "Nice to meet you, Alisa-san always takes care of me." Mikhail extended his right hand in silence.

Oh, a handshake?

Suspecting this in an instant, Masachika shook Mikhail's offered hand —

Whoa!?

He was shaken by an unexpectedly strong grip, and Masachika involuntarily raised his eyebrows.

W-what? Could this be one of those things where they crush your hand with a smiling face like in manga!?

As Masachika anticipated a scene of the hand being squeezed to the point of making a crushing sound, the divine Tomohisa reappeared in his mind.

“ Ho ho ho, *you’re overthinking it, Masachika. Russian handshakes are generally firmer compared to Japanese ones.”*

Really? Are you sure this means nothing, then? Seriously?

While doubting the credibility of the suspicious explanation given by the imaginary Tomohisa, Masachika felt Mikhail release his hand without tightening his grip further, as if to prove Tomohisa’s words.

“Could you go over there for now? Masha, Sayaka, and Nonoa are there too.”

“Ah, sure.”

Prompted by Alisa, Masachika nodded and headed towards the indicated direction. Passing through the hallway and opening the door, he entered a spacious living room where Maria, Sayaka, and Nonoa were sitting on the sofa.

“Ah, Kuze-kun, welcome!”

“Good evening.”

“Kuzecchi, what’s up～”

“Pardon my intrusion… you’re early, both of you.”

Approaching them, Masachika glanced over the belongings of Sayaka and Nonoa. Confirming that the two had what seemed to be birthday presents for Alisa, he asked in a hushed voice just to be sure.

“When do you plan to give the presents? If you’ve decided, I’ll sync up with you guys…”

The one who answered the question wasn’t Sayaka or Nonoa but Maria.

“We’re planning to hand the presents after we eat, during the cake cutting.”

“Ah, I see.”

Having understood, Masachika discreetly shared that information as others continued to arrive one by one through the entrance.

“All that’s left is Yuki and Ayano, huh…?”

Glancing at the wall clock, Masachika noted that there were just over ten minutes left until the party’s start time at 6 p.m. Yuki, who usually acted with ample time, seemed to be running a bit late, and Masachika couldn’t help but wonder.

Well, she’s coming by car. Maybe she got caught in traffic or got lost…

Satisfying himself with that explanation, five more minutes passed, and still, the two hadn’t appeared. The doorbell finally rang just three minutes before 6 p.m.

“They’re a bit late, aren’t they?”

While watching Alisa and her parents go to greet them, Chisaki commented. Agreeing with her, the sound of the entrance door opening and closing was heard, and then, after a while, the living room door opened.

“?”

However, only Ayano was present. Behind her were Alisa and her parents, who had gone to greet them. As Masachika tilted his head, Ayano bowed.

“Everyone, I apologize for being late.”

“Oh, it’s okay～? It’s still… oh, it’s exactly 6:00.”

“Thank you for your consideration. Regarding Yuki-sama…

actually, she had an unavoidable urgent matter, and I deeply apologize, but she won’t be able to attend today.”

“Eh?”

Masachika couldn’t help but unintentionally question Yuki’s out of the blue uncharacteristic action of canceling plans for a friend’s birthday

party. Without missing a beat, Maria, placing her hand on her cheek, raised her voice.

“Oh～, so Yuki-chan had such an important matter that she couldn’t skip～.”

Startled by those words, Masachika immediately stepped in to follow up.

“Yeah. Maybe that’s why it got down to the wire?”

“…Yes.”

“Ah, that must have been tough. Well, it’s a shame for Yuki; she was really looking forward to this too.”

Emphasizing that Yuki didn’t want things to go this way, Nonoa nodded along.

“Well, Yuki has some unique family circumstances～. She probably has to deal with something that we can’t even imagine～.”

Following that, the others expressed sentiments along the lines of

“It’s a shame, but it can’t be helped.” Furthermore, Alisa herself agreed without showing any signs of being offended, fortunately diffusing any tension. Yuki’s absence was accepted.

Feeling relieved, Masachika subtly asked Ayano.

“(So, what happened?)”

Masachika assumed that, being a part of Yuki’s family, Ayano could disclose the contents of the urgent matter to him. It was a question made with that judgment in mind. However, contrary to his expectations, Ayano bowed her head apologetically.

“(I’m sorry. I can’t share the details even with you, Masachika-sama.)”

“(Oh, um…? Is that so?)”

Slightly taken aback, Masachika reluctantly withdrew. Just then, Alisa spoke up.

“Well, shall we start then…”

With everyone’s attention now on the protagonist of the day, all eyes

turned towards Alisa. Bowing gracefully, she looked around at the gathered individuals with a slightly shy smile.

“Thank you all for gathering here for my birthday. I’d be happy if you enjoy it until the end.”

Upon hearing those words, Masachika applauded loudly.

“Happy birthday, Alya!”

“Congratulations!”

“““““““““Congratulations!”””””””””””

Blessings and applause erupted, and a blushing Alisa acknowledged them.

And so, Alisa’s birthday party began.

⋆･☆･⋆

Ah, yeah, this taste… It’s nostalgic. It’s almost like a trip down memory lane…

As everyone settled into their seats, approximately thirty minutes into the party, the table was adorned with various dishes prepared by Alisa, with the assistance of Akemi. Among them, Masachika, facing Alisa’s homemade borscht, was indulging in peculiar sentiments.

Back before summer vacation, when Masachika fell ill and was bedridden, Alisa had made borscht for him. Though the ingredients seemed to have changed a bit, with the addition of beef this time, the unique combination of acidity and sweetness specific to the dish remained unchanged.

Yeah, delicious.

Having finished the borscht in his bowl, Masachika received a plate filled with various dishes smoothly offered from his side.

“Thank you very much…”

He nodded slightly, casting a brief glance at the person beside him. There, the person in question remained as intimidating as ever, imposing an impenetrable demeanor. Still not saying a word, yet diligently serving food.

Hey, what does this mean!? Am I being welcomed!? Or am I being tested for something!?

Seeking assistance, he turned his gaze to those around him, but Maria and Akemi were engrossed in a conversation of their own, and Ayano was silently munching on pasta.

How did it come to this…

While glancing at the lively neighboring table, Masachika sighed inwardly without revealing his thoughts on his face.

The main reason for this situation was the division of seating into two groups. With a total of twelve people, there weren't enough seats at the dining table alone. In addition to the dining table, there was a separate arrangement—a foldable low table that was placed next to yet another coffee table, creating a kind of Japanese-style seating with cushions and zabuton[3] around it.

So, Alisa, being the birthday girl, was seated at the dining table, with her parents on either side, Ayano next to Akemi, Mikhail next to Masachika, and the remaining seven sitting on the cushions around the foldable and coffee table.

At this point, Masachika honestly thought, "Seriously, next to her father?" But he also somehow thought that if anyone were to be picked from this group, it would be him and Ayano, so he accepted it. The problem was that Alisa, who was initially seated at the dining table, had switched places with Maria a few minutes ago and moved to where the others were.

Well, she's the protagonist for today, so it makes sense for her to interact with and receive blessings from everyone who's gathered to celebrate, right?

The reasoning was solid. Masachika was happy too, seeing Alisa, surrounded by friends, smiling happily. But her father next to him had not dropped his quiet and intimidating demeanor. Moreover, he was being constantly offered one dish after another, and his stomach was already quite full.

Um, is this beef stroganoff? I've heard of it before, but it's my first time eating it…

Scooping up mushrooms and beef immersed in a creamy soup-like sauce with a spoon, he brought it to his mouth. Contrary to

expectations, the meat was surprisingly tender, and Masachika raised an eyebrow in surprise.

Huh? I thought beef stroganoff would be a hearty, meaty dish with such a robust name… But how should I put it, it's more like the inside of a minced cutlet? Or rather, hamburg steak?

Either way, it was undoubtedly a dish that filled the stomach quite well. Masachika would find it challenging if there was more to come after this and the cake later.

So, I'll have to decline the next time around…

That was a bit scary. Mikhail, sitting next to him, occasionally served large portions without clear intentions, and that unpredictability frightened Masachika.

Since childhood, anticipating a future as a diplomat, Masachika had been thoroughly trained in communication skills, including practical experience. From that experience, he knew the importance of attempting communication and that most people, if spoken to, could be understood. Whether it was a dignified politician, a charismatic corporate executive, or an overwhelmingly popular super-rich person, Masachika had the confidence to speak and establish a certain level of camaraderie.

However, just because he could do it didn't mean he wanted to.

Whether he wanted to talk or not was a separate issue. Despite having the ability to speak with a friendly demeanor, Masachika didn't particularly enjoy actively deepening friendships. In short, he wasn't the type to actively seek closer ties. This meant that, despite his extensive amount of acquaintances and broad network within school, Masachika only had few close friends, indicating that he wasn't the type to eagerly foster relationships. In other words, he wasn't inclined to make friends with people he didn't know, and he preferred not to approach individuals who exuded intimidating auras.

Well, at this point, I can't really say that…

Sensing that Mikhail was about to serve more food, Masachika gathered his courage and spoke up.

"Ah, I've had enough. Thank you."

Mikhail turned to look at him, gazing down silently, and Masachika

felt a twinge of unease. However, he pressed on.

“Um, by the way… could you tell me your full name?”

In response to Masachika’s question, Mikhail tilted his head slightly and answered.

“Mikhail Makarovich Kujou.”

The name was spoken with a fluent Russian intonation, making it nearly impossible for anyone but Masachika to understand. Without showing any signs of agitation, Masachika responded.

“Thank you, Mikhail Makarovich.”

Seeing Mikhail slightly widen his eyes at the way he was addressed, Masachika felt a sense of accomplishment.

All right! I remembered that! When addressing a Russian, it’s not with Mister or any suffix or honorific, but using their first name and their middle name!

Judging that he had a good grasp on the situation, Masachika continued the conversation.

“Your last name is the same as your wife’s. Did she change it when the both of you got married?”

Mikhail nodded in agreement.

“I see. I thought many international marriages had separate surnames. Was there a specific reason?”

To Masachika’s subsequent question, Mikhail remained silent. He turned his face away without uttering a word. Seeing this reaction, Masachika, who had been talking smoothly, grimaced.

Damn iiit! I messed up!!

He had innocently asked about something that might have been a delicate matter. Realizing this, Masachika tried to find a way to recover the conversation.

“Ah—”

But Mikhail spoke up, prompting Masachika to raise his face, awkwardly speaking in Japanese.

“Alisa, at school, how is she?”

“…Alisa? Ah, you mean how she’s doing at school?”

Masachika clarified, and Mikhail nodded. Relieved that the conversation was back on track, Masachika turned his gaze towards Alisa while responding.

“…Well, she’s quite popular as a very diligent and serious honor student. She’s hardworking and dedicated, and I think everyone around her respects her for that.”

Thinking “I’m glad I didn’t have to answer this in front of her,”

Masachika continued.

“Because of that, she used to omit an atmosphere that made her seem unapproachable. However, recently, she’s become more friendly with those around her, and now it seems like she has more people to talk to.”

While Masachika was speaking, Mikhail remained silent, staring at him. Masachika inwardly tensed.

Why the silence? You brought this up, so why the silence!?

Internalizing his anxiety, Masachika couldn’t help but sweat. Just then, the divine figure of Tomohisa appeared once again.

“Hohoho, don’t worry too much, Masachika. Unlike the Japanese, Russians tend to listen quietly without nodding or interjecting while the other person is speaking.”

Is that information really accurate? Or are you just handing out platitudes randomly!?

By now, Masachika felt like he was forcing the conversation, yet he continued to speak energetically.

“Uh, um, in the first semester, she seemed to struggle with public speaking, but during the school festival, she spoke very confidently…

She seems to have become more comfortable when speaking in front of people and has become even more reliable as a candidate for the next

student council president. She also has a surprisingly broad-minded

perspective, respecting and accepting people who are different from herself. I genuinely admire her for that."

Since Mikhail remained silent, Masachika kept on talking. His brain worked overtime to ensure a seamless flow of words. Unaware that his voice had unintentionally become louder, he continued.

"*Heh*, so that's how Kuze-kun thinks of Alya-chan, huh?"

Akemi's voice reached him as she emphasized Masachika's praise for Alisa. Masachika abruptly closed his mouth, as he awkwardly stared at her. In front of him, Akemi, sitting diagonally, was smiling happily, placing a hand on her cheek. Maria and Ayano were also attentively listening. As Masachika turned around, he noticed that the area with the low table had also become silent, with many curious and teasing glances directed his way. Furthermore, one person in particular had her face downturned, her ears red.

Ah. I'm dead—

With his mind going blank, Masachika was gripped with this thought while the suddenly quiet surroundings made him acutely aware of how the others were now paying attention.

As he panicked internally, Akemi, still smiling, turned to Mikhail.

"*Fufu*, that makes me happy. How about you, dear?"

In response to his wife's question, Mikhail nodded. Akemi, with a gentle smile, addressed Masachika.

"Sorry, Kuze-kun. He can only speak basic Japanese, and he's not very good with words… It must have been awkward for you, right? It's the first time Alya-chan brought so many friends here, so he was probably nervous."

"Eh, ah, well…"

"Thank you for talking to him so earnestly. Weren't you happy too?"

As his wife asked him again, Mikhail looked down at Masachika and spoke, maintaining a blank expression.

"I was, very happy, yes."

"Ah, it's…"

As he awkwardly smiled and replied, Masachika screamed internally.

Gah! This “not good at Japanese × socially awkward combo”—!!

He grabbed the flying Tomohisa, who was trying to make an excuse with a wry smile, and slammed him onto the ground. In addition, the mischievous Yuki, that had appeared just awhile ago, laughing heartily, was sent flying to the far reaches of his mind.

While glancing at Masachika, who was enduring incredible embarrassment, Alisa muttered with her head down. Embarrassed yet happy.

【Seriously, you idiot】

[1]: Specifically, “vich” means “son of” while “ovna” means “daughter of.” Hence the reason why Alya’s middle name is Mikhailovna.

[2]: One of the more popular vegetables among Russians.

[3]: A cushion for sitting at traditional Japanese settings, such as around a low table.

Chapter 9 - Blessing

“Alright～, here comes the cake～”

About an hour and a half after the party started, with the table cleared of various tableware, Mikhail, guided by Akemi, brought out a cake from the kitchen.

By the way, Alisa still had not returned to her seat at the dining table since the earlier debacle. Masachika, along with Maria, had been earnestly chatting with Akemi and Mikhail, and by now, he had become close enough with them to exchange jokes casually.

“No way! You’d only see something like this in America or at a buffet!”

Masachika didn’t hesitate to exclaim at the sight of the square cake that Mikhail had brought out, which appeared to be about 30

centimeters on each side. The males at the other table stared at him with gazes of admiration.

That’s amazing, Kuze. To gel with her father like that…

Masachika, how impressive~

He really can get along with anyone… he's really something else.

As the three other boys praised Masachika in their minds, Akemi smiled while placing candles.

"The more the merrier, right?"

"Well, I guess so?"

"Alright~, Alya-chan, come over here~"

Mikhail lit the sixteen candles, Maria turned off the lights in the room, and following Akemi's lead with her phone in hand, everyone gathered around the table, clapping their hands while singing.

"Happy birthday to you~, happy birthday to you~, happy

birthday, dear Alya~♪ Happy birthday, to you~"

As soon as they finished singing, Alisa found herself being showered with applause and cheers. Facing this group, Alisa blew out the candles with a puff, but the cake was too big so she couldn't extinguish them all in one go. With two additional puffs, she finally put out all the candles.

Amidst the growing applause, someone suddenly turned the lights back on, prompting Masachika to blink several times, before looking towards Alisa, only to be surprised by her teary-eyed appearance.

"Oh dear, Alya-chan, were you perhaps overwhelmed?"

Receiving a tissue quickly offered by Akemi, Alisa, covering her eyes, spoke with a voice moistened by tears.

"Sorry… but, to think that so many people are celebrating my birthday… It makes me happy."

Saying that, Alisa continued to hide her face behind both her hands. Upon hearing those words, Masachika's chest tightened as he recalled Alisa's words of frustration during the sports festival in their classroom.

Oh, I see… I'm happy for you, Alya.

He genuinely felt that from the depths of his heart. While Masachika

was tenderly gazing at her, Akemi and Maria embraced the sobbing Alisa from both sides.

Amidst the somewhat awkward emotions that mainly troubled the males present during such a sudden emotional scene, Chisaki strangely decided to join in.

“Oh, then let’s join in too. Come on, Ayano-chan, and Sayaka-chan too.”

While saying that, Chisaki hugged Maria and Alisa together.

Ayano approached timidly, gently patting Alisa’s back. Furthermore, Sayaka and Nonoa walked over, and just as Takeshi was about to step forward, looking around restlessly…

“Stay back, you guys!!”

“Sorry!”

In response to Chisaki’s instant intimidation, which prompted a quick apology from Takeshi, the living room burst into laughter.

Even Alisa, who still had her gaze face down, couldn’t help but smile, lifting her slightly reddened eyes. With smiles on their faces, Akemi and Maria kissed her on both cheeks, prompting Alisa to pout, looking embarrassed.

But just as Masachika found this scene heartwarming…

“Well then, while we’re cutting the cake, let’s give her our presents～”

The atmosphere turned tense at Maria’s announcement.

It wasn’t just Masachika; everyone seemed nervous, with glances conveying questions like “Who’s giving it first?” and “What kind of present did the others bring?” darting back and forth. In the midst of

this, Maria, who had briefly left the living room, returned with a square package wrapped in wrapping paper and ribbons.

“Here you go, happy birthday, Alya-chan～”

“Thank you…”

“Come on, open it, open it.”

Prompted by Maria, Alisa opened the package, revealing a pink scarf.

“How is it? Cute, right?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Alright, let me put it on you～”

“No, we’re about to eat cake—”

Ignoring Alisa’s deadpan retort, Maria wrapped the scarf around Alisa’s neck. Then, with simultaneous cheers from Maria and Akemi, Alisa, with a subtle expression, shrugged her shoulders as if giving up.

“Now, this one is from Mom and Dad. Here you go.”

While Akemi handed the present, the guests quickly exchanged glances. And somehow with just glances, it was decided that the order would be Masachika, Ayano, Prez, Vice-Prez, and then the band members.

Am I seriously going first?

Masachika had already faintly anticipated going first, and indeed, it turned out to be the case. With the remaining guests’ attention on him, Masachika approached Alisa with a bag in hand.

“Alya, happy birthday.”

“Thank you, Masachika-kun.”

Alisa placed the purse she had received from her parents aside and looked up at Masachika. Feeling the tension in her gaze, Masachika handed the bag to Alisa.

“These are… handmade sweets.”

“Eh, handmade?”

As Alisa widened her eyes in surprise, the others chimed in with expressions like “Ohhh” and “Wow, amazing.” Feeling a bit awkward, Masachika unintentionally uttered a defensive comment.

“Uh, sorry, I usually don’t make sweets, so while I think it tastes fine, the appearance is a bit… clumsy.”

“That’s completely fine, but…”

As Alisa said that, she opened the paper bag and pulled out a plastic bag from inside. In a somewhat embarrassed tone, Masachika scratched his cheek and spoke.

“A handmade… baumkuchen.”

“““How!?”””

“I tried my best.”

“““Is that something you can even make with just effort??”””[1]

In the presence of Masachika’s unexpected choice, everyone titled their heads in surprise. To be honest, he just made it using a square pan typically used for making rolled omelets; and surprisingly, it wasn’t that difficult.

“Oh, thank you… I’ll have some later.”

Rather than joy, Alisa initially seemed overwhelmed as she blinked her eyes rapidly, before stowing the baumkuchen back in the paper bag. Witnessing that, Masachika, with a sense of accomplishment, withdrew. Though he felt the gaze of others saying, “What’s with you, giving such a unique gift even though you’re going first,” for now, Masachika didn’t mind.

Well, there’s actually one more thing to do…

Ignoring Masachika, who was glancing down at his own bag, pondering, Ayano then headed towards Alisa.

“Now… next is me, as well as a present from Yuki-sama. Happy birthday, Alisa-san.”

“Thank you.”

Yuki’s present, as Masachika had forewarned, was a smartphone screen protector. And Ayano’s present was…

“A book?”

“Yes, it’s my favorite book.”

“Thank you… it’s a collection of short stories, right? I’ll give it a read.”

I see, a book! That was a clever idea!

As Masachika praised Ayano's gift internally, Touya raised his voice.

"Oh, what a coincidence. I also got a book."

Saying so, Touya's present to Alisa was a book titled "Twenty Ways to Move People's Hearts."

Did he read that book when he was running for president? Or did he use it to charm Sarashina-senpai? I can somehow imagine that being the case.

Next, Chisaki handed Alisa an…

"…Omamori[2]?"

A small, white, cloth bag sealed with a golden string. The shape itself resembled an omamori, but what puzzled Alisa was that there was nothing written on its surface

"Yes, an omamori."

"Thank you… What kind is it?"

"Eh, various kinds?"

"Various kinds…?"

"Yeah, it might even turn into a substitute for you."

"It might what??"

"Ah, don't open your mouth, okay? It might come out."

"What??"

Alisa donned a puzzled expression, facing an omamori that seemed to possess various menacing traits. On the other hand, Chisaki, with a sense of accomplishment, stepped back, leaving Alisa with no chance to question her further. The problem then shifted to the four people who followed.

"What's the next move!?"

"Eh? I really don't want to go next."

"Is that so? Then, how about being the last one, then?"

The remaining left communicated through eye contact, and as if

ignoring them completely, Nonoa stepped forward.

“Happy birthday~. Here’s my gift.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s a compact[3]. Alisa, you don’t usually wear makeup, but this isn’t something you’d be troubled with, right?”

“That’s true. I do tidy up my hair, so I’ll make use of it. Thank you.”

“Now, it’s my turn.”

Surprising Takeshi and Hikaru, Sayaka followed, heading towards Alisa.

“I was torn between a few options… but, I’ve got you a hat.”

“Oh, it’s cute.”

What was revealed underneath the wrapping was a black beret.

Alisa immediately put it on while looking at the compact she received from Nonoa.

“It suits you very well.”

“Thank you, Sayaka-san.”

Alisa smiled, prompting Sayaka to return one of her own too.

Amidst this beautiful scene, there were two guys left behind.

Ah~ah, how pitiful.

After the girls’ genuinely tasteful presents, Masachika inwardly sighed, offering a silent prayer for his best friends who were now in the spotlight. Then, in the order of Takeshi and then Hikaru, they gave their presents. Takeshi’s gift was some slightly expensive ochazuke tea[4]

leaves. Hikaru’s present was a stylish pen… Masachika, who had been watching it as if it had nothing to do with him, almost spit out his juice.

The reason being, the upper part of the pen Hikaru gave unexpectedly contained… a small herbarium.

That was close! Thanks, Yuki!

Having escaped a scenario of giving similar presents, Masachika silently extended his gratitude to his sister who wasn't present.

⋆･☆･⋆

Concluding the present unwrapping without any incident, everyone had a slice of cake with a sense of relief. Then, suddenly, a small explosion was heard from the outside.

Turning their attention in that direction, they saw fireworks rising in the distance, to everyone's surprise.

"Oh, fireworks～. I wonder if they're celebrating Alya-chan's birthday～."

"There's no way."

Promptly giving a retort to Akemi's comments, which she couldn't tell were serious or joking, Alisa explained to everyone.

"There's a wedding venue close to here, so sometimes you can see fireworks."

Listening to her sober explanation, everyone nodded. However, without showing any interest in such a dreamless truth, Akemi poured drinks into everyone's glasses before raising her own towards Alisa.

"Well then, with the fireworks going off, let's toast again, Alya-chan! Happy birthday～!"

"Why again?"

Alisa pursed her lips in embarrassment, but starting with Maria, the others followed Akemi's lead. Seeing so many glasses being raised, Alisa also lifted her glass, albeit slightly shrinking her shoulders.

"Congratulations～!"

"Congratulations!"

"…Thanks."

Once again, receiving birthday blessings from family and friends, Alisa awkwardly expressed her gratitude. Then, Maria pointed her smartphone camera at her.

“Okay, Alya-chan, say cheese.”

“Geez, you don’t have to do that…”

“Why～? There can never be too many photos on special days like this, right～?”

“We already took some earlier, didn’t we?”

Hiding her face with her hands, Alisa shyly refused as Akemi also joined in. Evading her mother and sister persistently aiming their phones at her, Alisa headed to the balcony.

“Alya-chan, where are you going?”

“Fireworks.”

With just a short reply, Alisa opened the sliding door, slipped on her sandals, and went out to the balcony. Spotting her reddened ears, Maria smiled gently.

“Alya-chan, you’re so cute.”

“*Fufu*, she’s never been celebrated with so many friends before, so she’s probably embarrassed～”

Saying so with genuine joy, Akemi directed a gentle smile at everyone present.

“Once again, thank you, everyone. Alisa can be awkward in some ways, but please take care of her from now on too, okay?”

“…Thank you very much.”

Matching Akemi’s bow, Mikhail also nodded his head slightly.

Touched by the unexpected gratitude from her parents, everyone responded with a mix of bashfulness and smiles. Amidst this, Masachika watched Alisa from behind as she gazed at the fireworks from the balcony, when a thought occurred to him.

Wait, isn’t this my chance?

With that in mind, Masachika made sure the others were preoccupied with Akemi and Mikhail. Then, grabbing his belongings, he quietly stood up. With a casual demeanor, he moved towards the wall.

Yes, he must not let anyone predict his destination. Blend into the atmosphere, become the atmosphere…

Like Ayano!

Feeling somewhat like a warrior using his comrade's technique in a battle with the final boss, Masachika exerted his full effort to disappear. However…

Oh.

Just as he reached the sliding door, his eyes met squarely with Nonoa. Then, Nonoa, raising an eyebrow, was about to say something—when Ayano called out to her, drawing her attention in that direction.

Thank god. Thanks, Ayano!

It wasn't like he had planned it, but at just the right moment, his childhood friend diverted Nonoa's attention, and Masachika silently thanked her in his mind.

Hm? *Since when did those two have some kind of connection…?*

Despite faintly raising a doubt in the back of his mind, Masachika didn't dwell on it deeply. Without making a sound, he quietly opened the sliding door and swiftly stepped out onto the balcony.

"……?"

Of course, no matter how much he tried to eliminate his noise and presence, the moment he opened the sliding door, the sounds from inside would emanate onto the balcony, so there was no way Alisa wouldn't notice.

"Oh, yo."

Not sure what to say to Alisa, who turned around over her shoulder, Masachika raised his left hand and casually announced his presence. As he did, Alisa glanced at his bag held in his right hand, then returned her gaze to outside the balcony. Standing next to each other hesitantly, she asked while still faced forward.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, no… um, did the fireworks just end?"

Uncertain about how to approach the topic, Masachika stumbled over

his words. Whether Alisa noticed his evasion or not, she answered calmly.

“Yeah, a big one just went up, so I think it’s over now.”

“I see.”

Then, silence.

Amidst the distant sounds of insects chirping and cars driving by, Masachika frowned at his own indecisiveness and scratched his head.

He had unintentionally mentioned an unrelated topic due to his nervousness, but he couldn’t waste time here.

“……”

Glancing behind him, he could see that the others were excited about something inside. For now, it seemed like they hadn’t been noticed, but he couldn’t let his guard down. The longer they stayed together, the higher the chance of someone realizing Masachika and

Alisa were alone. Besides, it seemed like Nonoa had already noticed him.

Ah, geez! I’ve already come this far so I might as well brace myself.

Taking a sharp breath to encourage himself, Masachika gestured lightly with both hands, keeping an eye on the others inside

“Sorry, come over here for just a moment…”

“? What is it?”

Turning both hands towards the puzzled Alisa, Masachika moved to a position hidden from view by the curtain. After confirming once again that no one could see them, he turned back to Alisa. Sensing something, Alisa also turned her body towards Masachika.

“Well… Actually, I have another present for you…”

“?”

As Masachika gathered his courage and spoke, Alisa blinked a few times, before directing her gaze at the bag Masachika held.

“Ah, right. This thing…”

Feeling awkward, he took out a wrapped present from his bag. At the same time, the words Yuki had said flashed back in his mind.

“What I’m saying is to convey your feelings through words and actions.”

“If you do what we’ve been doing every year… Alya-san’s favorability for you will skyrocket, leading to an instant event unlock, you know?”

Recalling those words, Masachika’s entire body heated up, and a ferocious tickling sensation spread from his chest throughout his body.

Having Yuki tell him that was already embarrassing by itself, but the thought of actually doing it with Alisa made him want to roll around in shame.

Nooooo, embarrassing! But brace yourself, me! Yuki said it too!

Once a year, at least on someone’s birthday, you have to show them your feelings directly!!

With a twisted smile and his teeth tightly clenched, Masachika made up his mind in an instant. Lifting his face, he presented the gift to Alisa, who seemed slightly taken aback.

“Here, for you.”

“T-Thank you…”

Alisa, slightly bewildered, accepted the gift, but Masachika didn’t let go. Staring straight at Alisa, who raised her eyebrow, Masachika suppressed his embarrassment and spoke.

“Thank you for being born into this world, Alya.”

Alisa’s eyes widened at those words. Aware that her blue eyes were fixed directly on him, Masachika continued, resisting the urge to scream and roll around with all his might.

“Happy birthday, Alya. I sincerely appreciate that you were born and met me, from the bottom of my heart.”

Managing to close his mouth after saying that, a mischievous image of Yuki appeared in Masachika’s mind, shouting loudly.

“Now’s the time! Give her a kiss! Go for the kill, and then with your tongue __”

Shut up! Idiot!

Shooing away the noisy little devil, Masachika let go of the gift.

Alisa, looking stunned, slowly hugged the present to her chest, then smiled gently after a few seconds.

【Thank you too.】

Shocking even herself with her Russian, she blinked several times as if returning to her normal self. Then, she smiled softly again before speaking in Japanese.

“Me too… I’m glad I met you too.”

Setting aside any attempt to hide her embarrassment, her words were conveyed directly and honestly. The embarrassment that had covered Masachika’s entire body disappeared in an instant. In its place, a pure sense of joy enveloped him. Both of them celebrated the miracle of meeting each other, and believed they were truly blessed by their serendipitous encounter. Masachika believed, deep in his heart, that it was a true miracle.

Ah, crap. I really want to hug her.

Masachika felt a sense of danger from the emotions welling up from his chest. No, if it were Yuki in front of him right now, he would have already hugged her with all his might and maybe even given her a kiss on the cheek or forehead. However, doing that with Alisa was risky.

In his mind, the little devil version of Yuki was screaming, “Go for it!

Gooooo fooooor iiiiiit!” with a megaphone, yet he still felt that it was unacceptable.

This is bad… B-But…

Alisa’s soft smile, her blue eyes gazing gently at him. Faced with that, the voice of reason within Masachika’s head gradually faded away, and it wasn’t clear who took the first step.

The distance between the two shortened with each step…

Following the echoing sound that seemed to resonate through the core of his body, a brilliant burst of light erupted at the edge of Masachika's field of vision. Turning to that direction, he witnessed a large firework painting the night sky, bursting and scattering its lights.

After staring at the spectacle in awe, Masachika suddenly snapped back to reality and looked at Alisa. She, too, blinked as if awakening

from a dream and turned towards Masachika. Simultaneously, they both took a half step back, realizing how close they were to each other.

“Ah, the fireworks aren’t over yet, huh?”

“Yeah, it seems so. I think that was the last one? Oh, can I open this?”

“Ah, go ahead, go ahead.”

“*Hmm*, where’s the tape on this…?”

“Oh, I’ll turn on my phone’s flashlight.”

Trying to escape the atmosphere from before, both of them spoke quickly with somewhat fake smiles. Under the illumination of Masachika’s smartphone flashlight, Alisa carefully peeled off the wrapping tape and took out… a pair of white gloves.

“It’s going to get colder. I thought these might be useful.”

While Masachika explained with a bashful smile, Alisa’s gaze fell on the blue snowflake embroidery on the gloves and the red string with a white pom pom attached to the wrist.

Yeah, well, she’s bound to notice.

He knew it. But there was no helping it. The moment he saw these gloves in the store, he thought, “I have to buy these.” If asked why he didn’t give them in front of everyone, well, it was a bit too genuine and embarrassing. And, to be honest, it was still quite embarrassing right now…

Why is she so silent!?

Alisa didn’t seem to be reacting at all, causing Masachika to struggle with a mixture of frustration and anticipation.

And right in front of him.

Alisa, too, was desperately suppressing a throbbing feeling deep in her chest.

Why… why is he always doing things like this for me?

Masachika’s words and the present prepared exclusively for her caused Alisa’s buried feelings to flutter in her chest.

Why? Masachika-kun, you like Yuki-san, she's more important to you than anyone else… So why would you do something like this?

Am I misunderstanding something…!?

Joy and resentment wrestled with each other within her chest.

Why would he do something that might instigate misunderstandings?

What a cruel person. Such petty thoughts filled her mind, and as Alisa instinctively glared up at Masachika—the moment their eyes met, something burst in the depths of her chest.

Ah, I can't… contain it anymore—

In an instant, the sense of crisis was swept away by an overwhelming surge of emotions. Unconsciously, Alisa took a step forward. Immediately after…

"Alisa~"

With the sound of the sliding door opening, Alisa abruptly stopped. Turning towards the source of the voice, she found Nonoa's face peeking out, gesturing for Alisa to come back.

"Hey, you might want to come back in~"

"Eh? Why…?"

"Why? Well~."

Turning back to the room, Nonoa made an ambiguous noise and then looked at Alisa again.

"Yeah, it might be too late already."

"What's going on?"

"Well, um… Yeah."

Without providing a clear answer, Nonoa withdrew her face.

Confused, Alisa tilted her head, realizing she had unconsciously taken a step forward and withdrew her foot in a haste.

D-Dangerous That was really close…

Taking a deep breath, Alisa managed to regain her mental composure. Then, she noticed Masachika, who was peering inside with a puzzled expression, and gently looked up at him. Despite the throbbing in her chest, she smiled, making sure not to show her inner turmoil.

“Thank you for the gloves. I really do like them.”

“Ah, oh, I’m glad you do.”

“Shall we go back then?”

Avoiding eye contact with Masachika and carefully putting the gloves back into its bag, Alisa quickly headed back indoors. If they stayed out here together any longer, she felt like she might unintentionally reveal her complicated emotions to Masachika.

My chest hurts.

Holding the present from Masachika against her chest, Alisa bit her lip. Despite the multitude of emotions filling her, she forced herself to smile.

Geez, what the hell!

Feeling like a child throwing a tantrum, Alisa returned to the room with somewhat rough steps.

“And this is Alya-chan when she was four!”

““So cute～!””

“Oh, she had blonde hair.”

“Like a real-life angel…”

“Wait, where did you get that album from!?”

Understanding Nonoa’s warning, Alisa realized the importance of not carelessly leaving her mother alone with her friends.

[1]: Baumkuchen is super hard to make (which is also why its store bought variants are usually on the more pricey side).

[2]: Amulets/lucky charms sold at Shinto and Buddhist shrines.

[3]: A, often circular, cosmetic product that contains a mirror and loose face powder.

[4]: Ochazuke is a dish consisting of green tea over rice.

Chapter 10 - Confession

…What was that reaction all about?

It was well past 8 p.m when they finished eating the cake. Nonoa suggested playing the Werewolf game[1], which was unanimously accepted. As the others gathered around, Masachika pondered Alisa's earlier reaction while using the restroom.

Is it just me or did she glare at me for a moment…? Did I mess up somehow? But she said she liked the gift… Hmm Unable to determine whether his gift was a good choice or not, Masachika sighed and exited the restroom. Immediately, someone called out to him from beside.

"Masachika-sama."

"*Hm*, oh."

Turning, he saw Ayano standing in the dim hallway.

Ah, Ayano needs the bathroom too.

Thinking so, he stepped aside to give her space, but Ayano continued to gaze at him intently.

"I think it's about time for me to take my leave."

"Eh, really? Curfew or something…?"

Certainly, it was already completely dark outside during this time of the year, but it shouldn't matter much to Ayano, who had a car waiting for her. However, as Masachika thought about this, Ayano hesitated for a moment before speaking.

"To be honest… the excuse about Yuki-sama having urgent matters was a lie."

"Eh?"

Surprised, Masachika listened as Ayano spoke with determination.

"The truth is… Yuki-sama has fallen ill with the flu."

"Eh…"

“Yuki-sama didn’t want to worry everyone or ruin the mood at the party, so she had me lie about it…”

“……”

Only half of Ayano’s explanation made it into Masachika’s mind.

Yuki had contracted the flu. The same Yuki who had never fallen ill since junior high and had never been late or absent subsequently.

Why…

As Masachika thought blankly, he recalled the fake smile Yuki had flashed when they were shopping for clothes

So that’s it…

Intuitively, he understood. He must have noticed. That Yuki was burdened with worries about their mother.

Even though I already noticed…

As a result of feigning blindness, Yuki…

“H-How is she?”

As Masachika asked, unable to suppress his agitation, Ayano furrowed her brows in discomfort as she answered.

“She’s receiving treatment from a doctor… but she’s still suffering from a high fever. She also has a sore throat and has been coughing a lot…”

“Coughing…”

From the depths of his memory, the image of Yuki from the past resurfaced. The time from when she started violently coughing, unable to stop, despite being fine just moments ago. From when his little sister collapsed onto her bed, desperately gasping for air with white lips, wheezing. Masachika could only call for an adult at the time. And as he

gently stroked his sister’s back, he was surprised by the sensation of her spine against his hand, and how thin her skin felt.

“—ka-sama, Masachika-sama!”

“!”

Startled by Ayano’s call, Masachika snapped back to reality.

Looking down at Ayano awkwardly, he saw her furrow her brows in discomfort.

“Masachika-sama… I understand that you’re avoiding the Suou household. But… could you please visit Yuki-sama?”

“Eh—”

“Right now, I think Yuki-sama needs you more than anyone else.”

It was something Ayano had told him during the sports festival.

But… reflexively, the words that pushed past Masachika’s lips were…

“I can’t… go.”

A strained rejection.

“Masachika-sama…!”

Ayano, who usually kept her emotions hidden, raised her voice ever so slightly.

What faced Masachika was the accusing gaze of a childhood friend that he considered to be another sister. It pierced deeply into his chest.

Still, his lips remained sealed. “I’ll go too.” That was all he had to say, yet even those simple words refused to leave his throat. For Masachika, the Suou mansion had become a symbol of anguish and regret. The somber face of Yumi, and Gensei’s cold gaze; they crammed down on his vocal chords, blocked by excuses like, “What difference would it make if I went? “What will the others think if we leave now together?” Such cowardly thoughts swirled in his mind.

Click

The door to the living room clicked open, and Chisaki peeked out.

“Huh? What’s wrong? The game’s about to start.”

Chisaki gave a puzzled look to the two standing in the hallway.

Quick to react, Ayano spoke.

“No, it’s nothing.”

With that, she turned on her heel and whispered to Masachika behind her.

“(I’ll be waiting downstairs for ten minutes.)”

The deadline for his decision loomed over Masachika’s stomach.

He suddenly felt nauseous and heavy.

No matter how long you wait, I…

The living room was filled with bright, cheerful vibes. He didn’t want to go back there. But with Chisaki’s curious gaze in front of him, he couldn’t refuse.

Dragging his heavy feet, Masachika followed Ayano back into the living room. Stopping at the entrance, Ayano bowed to Alisa and the others.

“I apologize. But I will take my leave now.”

Masachika couldn’t bring himself to look directly at her. Without the composure to maintain his expression, he took advantage of everyone’s attention on Ayano and quietly slipped away to the wall.

Feeling as if Ayano were staring at him with condemnation, Masachika let out a breath only after she left the living room, as he started to vehemently loathe his cowardly self.

“What’s wrong, Kuzecchi?”

Despite trying to blend into the wall, Masachika was called out as if targeted. He raised his head, and there was Nonoa, peering at him with her usual half opened eyes. Masachika quickly forced a smile.

“No, it’s nothing…”

“Really～? You had a scary look on your face though.”

“Did I? Maybe I was just lost in thought.”

Unable to come up with a clever excuse, Masachika tried to cover up his obvious lie. Nonoa stared at him intently… then suddenly

withdrew her indifferent attitude and put on a serious expression.

“Really?”

“Eh—”

“Is it really nothing?”

Nonoa’s unusually serious question unsettled Masachika. And his unease grew even more with Nonoa’s next words.

“I know you’re wary of me, Kuzecchi, but I also want to return a favor just like anyone else, you know?”

It was a typical, straightforward statement from Nonoa, pointing out his wariness of her bluntly. Perhaps that’s why her subsequent words felt genuine.

“I’ll at least listen to what you have to say, okay? Whether it’s about Yuki or Yusho, I think I’m more familiar with Kuzecchi’s circumstances than others. I don’t mean to brag, but I’m capable of giving you some objective advice, you know～?”

“……”

Honestly, Masachika was surprised at how much his heart wavered. If there were no one else around at this moment, he might have confided in Nonoa in his desperation.

But…

“……”

Watching Alisa receiving an explanation about the Werewolf game from Sayaka and Maria, seeing Touya, Chisaki, Takeshi, and Hikaru chatting amiably, Masachika forced himself to smile.

“Thank you… but, I’m okay for now.”

“…Can you hang in there?”

Nonoa’s blunt question struck at the heart of the matter, causing Masachika’s eyes to widen… weakly smiling in response.

“Yeah, I’ll do my best… Thank you.”

“*Hm*, okay.”

With a nod, Nonoa gracefully backed off, respecting Masachika's decision. Then, she turned around and, in a completely different tone, listlessly addressed the other seven.

"Well then, shall we start soon~? With nine of us, two werewolves should be fine, right?"

"Yes, that sounds good. As for the other roles, we'll have a seer, a medium, and a night watchman, for now."[2]

"Um, sorry. I still haven't fully grasped the rules yet…"

"Really? Then, how about we have a practice round to try out the app[3]? It's been a while for me too~"

Amidst the lively discussion regarding the rules of the werewolf game, Masachika attempted to blend in with a smile.

Ah, this… might be tougher than I thought.

Such pessimistic thoughts flashed through his mind in an instant.

Just moments ago, he had told Nonoa that he would do his best; yet… Masachika was already feeling the strainful discord between his inner turmoil and outward appearance, causing his heart to creak uncomfortably.

"Wait, I got killed right away!?"

"Okay~, Takeshi, you'll just be spectating now~"

"Seriouslyyy~?"

Amidst the overflowing smiles and laughter, Masachika felt unable to join the atmosphere, as he forcefully laughed with a plastered smile on his face in a desperate attempt to fit in. He found that aspect of himself truly repulsive. To laugh along while his sister was suffering… he couldn't help but think he was a truly despicable person.

"Ah, I've been killed. Hey, seriously, who's the werewolf?"

"Huh, so Masachika wasn't the werewolf after all…"

"Hey, you were suspecting me!?"

Disgusting. It made him want to vomit. He hated it. He wished he could just die.

Ah, I can't take it anymore.

Just as he thought that, their phones announced the end of the game, and Chisaki and Maria cheered.

"Yay! We won! Nice, Masha!"

"Oh, we won, didn't we!? Yay!"

Watching the two high-five, Masachika stood up. Then, with the most apologetic smile he could muster, he bowed.

"I'm sorry, but I also need to get going soon…"

"Eh, really?"

"But the real round is starting soon…"

"Oh my~, what a shame."

"Well then, I'll see you off—"

"Ah, it's alright."

Stopping Alisa as she tried to get up, Masachika quickly grabbed his belongings as Nonoa's eyes observed him intently. Sensing her gaze, Masachika deliberately avoided looking in her direction and instead went to Alisa's side, smiling gently.

"Once again, happy birthday, Alya. I'll be heading home first, but have a great night."

"Ah, yeah…"

"Sorry, just need the key."

With that, Masachika bid farewell to Akemi and Mikhail, who were cleaning up in the kitchen, and hurried to the entrance.

Opening the door, a chilly November breeze rushed in. Walking briskly through it, Masachika checked the time on his phone.

I'll be waiting downstairs for ten minutes.

It had been fifteen minutes since Ayano had left. Thinking about it rationally, she was probably already on her way home, but if Ayano had waited for a little longer, then perhaps…

Ayano waiting for him or going home first. Unsure of which outcome he wished for, Masachika boarded the elevator. Whether it was out of nervousness or fear, his heart pounded ferociously. Suppressing it desperately, Masachika exited the elevator and passed through the entrance—only to feel a definite sense of relief at the absence of a car.

"…Damn it!"

Uttering curses at his own revealed true feelings, Masachika began to walk aimlessly down the deserted street.

"You're running away again."

A voice filled with contempt echoed in the back of his mind.

Without the willpower to argue back, Masachika walked on aimlessly.

Then, suddenly coming across a small park, he sluggishly made his way there and plopped down on a bench.

"……"

He had run away. That much was certain. But he still had a chance to make amends. He knew the address of the Suou mansion. He could hail a taxi and chase after her now. Besides, Kyotarou was currently still at home. If he hurried back and explained the situation, they could go to the Suou household together.

Yes, he knew that. It's precisely because he knew… he was sitting here.

"It's not too late. Are you going to keep being a useless jerk?

You'll regret it if you don't go now!"

What can I do if I go? After all, I missed the chance Ayano gave me. How can I face her?

"Forget about that, that's not the issue! Yuki is suffering. There's no need for another reason to be by her side!"

You're overthinking it. She's seeing a doctor, and in this day and age, with something like the flu, as long as she takes her medication, her fever will go down soon and she'll be fine.

"So!? You know I didn't mean it like that! As a brother, if your sister is suffering, you have to be by her side unconditionally! Besides, for someone

with asthma, something like a mere flu can—”

Two conflicting voices clashed violently in his head. He understood. He knew which voice he should listen to. But despite knowing that, his body wouldn’t move.

As he remained like this, time passed. And as more time passed, it only became harder to go. He understood it, yet he continued to waste more time. He simply let the cold bench and the biting chill steal the warmth from his unmoving body.

Ah, again…

Again, he sank further into regret and self-loathing, satisfied with sinking deeper while doing nothing. Knowing he was at fault, and yet thinking that it was okay because he had blamed himself enough. Using self-punishment as an excuse to avoid facing any true consequence.

The mistakes of the past, the biggest regrets of Masachika’s life.

He had a feeling that he wouldn’t be able to run away from it much longer. He had promised Maria that he would face it eventually. Yet, when the time came, he tried to run away again—

“*Ugh… gaaaghh!* ”

He clutched his head with both his hands and scratched at it with all his might. Sharp pain shot through him, and it throbbed where his nails had dug in. Yet, he persisted, biting his lip. Knowing it was meaningless, yet having nothing else to do.

Oh, why not just stay lost here until morning? If he caught a cold or froze and collapsed, would that at least be some form of atonement?

At that moment, when thoughts resembling a desire for self-destruction crossed his mind—

“Masachika, is that you?”

Hearing the voice of someone who shouldn’t be here, Masachika froze. He doubted whether he had misheard, but when he looked up, he saw the tip of her boots in his field of vision, dispelling that doubt.

Raising his head slowly, he found Alisa standing there, holding Masachika’s jacket, her eyes wide with surprise as she looked down at

him.

“I, um, when I went to lock the door, I realized you forgot your jacket… And, you seemed strange, so I got worried, and…”

“…Yeah.”

“What… happened?”

Masachika hung his head in silence at Alisa’s question.

There was nothing he could say. Besides, Alisa didn’t even know the exact relationship between Masachika and Yuki. And even if he told her everything, what would happen then? It would only be adding insult to injury.

“…Could you just… pretend you didn’t see anything?”

“Eh?”

A voice of confusion responded to Masachika’s muttered words.

Without raising his face, Masachika covered his eyes with both hands and continued in a stiff voice.

“I don’t want to have your birthday be ruined just because of someone like me… So please, just forget about it,”

“Wha—… There’s no way I can do that, right!?”

Alisa grabbed both of his shoulders forcefully, lifting him up.

Then, with a forceful grip on his collar, she glared at him from point-blank range.

“What happened!? Tell me!!”

“……..”

Masachika stared into Alisa’s burning blue eyes with a hint of surprise. Sensing Masachika’s slow response, Alisa clenched her teeth and sighed lightly, lowering her gaze.

Then, in a voice that seemed forcibly restrained…

“Do you remember? The bet we made before the end-of-term exams during the first semester.”

“?”

“We made a bet on whether you could make it in the top thirty, remember?”

Faced with her words, Masachika remembered. During the end-of-term exams in the first semester, they had made a bet regarding whether Masachika could achieve a top thirty ranking. The loser would have to fulfill one request.

“Yeah, I remember that.”

Looking at Masachika mutter this as if it were someone else’s business, Alisa raised her eyes, sending him a piercing gaze.

“I’m exercising the winner’s right from back then. Tell me what happened.”

Masachika couldn’t help but feel speechless at her words. He hadn’t expected her to bring up a promise from months ago in this situation. But as he looked into Alisa’s sincere eyes… he found himself speaking without realizing it.

“Yuki… collapsed from the flu.”

Once he started talking, the words flowed out like water from a bursting dam, and Masachika could no longer stop.

“To avoid worrying everyone… she told Ayano she had urgent business to attend to… but the truth is, it’s because of how sick she is.

Even right now, Yuki is still suffering, and I… I couldn’t be there for her!”

As he spoke, feelings of shame and inadequacy welled up inside him, and Masachika bit his lip again and lowered his head.

From Masachika’s bowed shoulders, Alisa’s hands gently moved away. Then, in a quiet voice as she straightened up, her words shook Masachika’s ears.

“…Is that the reason?”

Her voice trembled with uncertainty… Masachika involuntarily raised his head, astonished to see Alisa’s tearful expression.

“I wonder why… I wanted to know the reason, but now I wish I didn’t

hear it…”

With a weak smile, Alisa muttered with a trembling voice in Russian.

【How terrible…】

Hearing those words… Masachika understood the reason for Alisa’s tearful expression.

Ah, that really is… how it is…

It was a misunderstanding. It wasn’t that he was neglecting her in comparison to Yuki. It was easy to say… but even if he said that, he knew it wouldn’t be enough to satisfy Alisa right now.

Masachika’s feelings toward Yuki were those of brotherly and familial love, but he couldn’t exactly explain the circumstances…

No, but… maybe it’s fine now?

Such a thought naturally floated into his mind.

What did his promise with Gensei matter? Could such a thing be the reason to keep the girl in front of him on the verge of tears? What was more important, Alisa’s heart or his promise with Gensei… That sort of thing—

“Alya, I told you that my parents are divorced, didn’t I?”

“Eh? Yeah…”

As Masachika changed the subject out of nowhere with a somewhat poignant smile, Alisa nodded in confusion. Looking into her eyes, he continued.

“My mother’s name is… Yumi Suou. My original name was Masachika Suou.”

“Eh—”

Looking up at Alisa, who stared at him wide-eyed and speechless, Masachika announced,

“Yuki… is my real sister.”

[1]: Also known as Mafia, it is a social deduction game between two teams, werewolves (who are an informed minority) and villagers (the uninformed minority). Each player is secretly assigned a role. The game has two phases: a night and day phase. The werewolves are able to kill one person each night, of which it is up to the players to discuss and debate who is the werewolf the following day. The game ends when one side wins (villagers win by successfully voting off the

werewolves, werewolves win by killing enough players to gain a numerical advantage.)

[2]: The seer has the ability each night to choose a player and enquire with the moderator if that player is the werewolf, the medium has the ability to communicate anonymously with dead players after each night, as well as reviving one dead villager once per game, while the night watchman has the ability to give one player immunity three times per game.

[3]: They are playing a video game variant of Werewolf (Wolvesville) on their phones instead of the physical version (where you sit in a circle and close your eyes while looking down during night) if you haven't already caught on. Also the reason why the medium role exists (isn't an actual role in more conventional and physical versions of this game as there isn't a way to communicate anonymously).

Epilogue - Repentance

I wanted to make her happy. I wanted her to have freedom. And if I couldn't do that, I wanted to at the very least continue being a reliable older brother.

It's all a blur in my memory now, back when Yuki and I were still really young.

I remember Yuki being a very curious and mischievous girl.

She loved the outdoors, was interested in everything she laid sight on, and wanted to try everything right away.

"What's this? How does that work? I want to try that. That looks like so much fun."

She was always full of energy and curiosity, her eyes always sparkling with excitement.

On the other hand, I, as the eldest son of the Suou family, was strictly disciplined and wasn't naturally lively. I think I was obedient and well-behaved, unlike my sister. However, I never envied or resented her for behaving so freely and spontaneously.

It was a matter of suitability. I didn't know the phrase "right person for the right job" back then, but while studying in my room, watching Yuki play freely in the garden with Ayano... I believed that there was a place for me here and a place for my sister there. That's how I

vaguely felt.

That daily routine suddenly shattered one day. One day, Yuki suddenly coughed and couldn't stop, and her breathing had become rough and wheezy. I thought it was just a cold, something that was meant to be temporary… but Yuki's symptoms showed no sign of improving. I still remembered how quickly her figure disappeared from the garden and the corridors of the mansion, and how strangely quiet our house had become.

She couldn't enjoy her favorite outdoor activities anymore... but even so, Yuki's curiosity remained undiminished. On her bed, with the same sparkling eyes, she read books, looked at pictures of deserts and icebergs, imagining herself in foreign lands, declaring that she'll become a pilot in the future when admiring cool planes, only to say she'd become a florist the next day after admiring pictures of beautiful flowers. Watching my sister like that, I jokingly said one day,

"Then I'll become a doctor and make Yuki healthy again!"

"Eh, but isn't Nii-sama going to be a diplomat?"

"Yeah. And I'll also become a doctor! Because I'm a genius, I can be both!"

"Nii-sama, you're amazing~!"

…It was just the playful words of an ignorant child. But receiving Yuki's words of pure admiration, I really felt like I could do it. I wanted to continue being a great brother whom my sister could rely on, so that she could feel safe. And someday, I wanted to send my sister back to where she belonged.

To the world outside, filled with freedom and never ending possibilities, matching her free-spirited and sparkling soul. To go wherever she wanted and become whoever she wanted to be. I thought that enabling her to do that was... the role that suited me, who didn't want to go anywhere or become anyone in particular.

...That's what I thought. But I betrayed my own wish.

"I'm sorry, Nii-sama. I... will stay in this house."

It's only now that I understand. At that time, the first thing I should have cared about… wasn't my parents, or the Suou household, or even myself. It was my little sister, who was kinder than anyone else.

But I made a mistake. Unable to correct it, I wandered aimlessly, while my sister, with her own strength, regained her health.

However, that very same sister who became healthy no longer spoke of her dreams like she used to.

“Nice to meet you all. I have been entrusted with the role of being the representative for the new students. My name is Yuki Suou.”

With her polite manners and impeccable conduct, she resembled me from the past.

I finally realized. Who I sacrificed to obtain this worthless freedom.

It was all because of my incompetence.

That my little sister, who was freer than anyone else, ended up forfeiting her life.

Afterword

Well then, it’s time for the usual useless afterword～... or so I’d like to say, but maybe not this time. Because this time, I don’t have the usual material to write about, and I’m not just going to jot down nonsense as it comes to mind. That’s right! This time, I actually have something to write about for this afterword! And not just one thing, but two! Here we go, bring it on, here are nine pages of an afterword! ...Well, that’s the plan, anyway.

So, this time, without the mysterious end-of-book short story, I’ll just write the afterword properly, seriously (to be omitted). It seems I’ve been thoroughly trained in the art of writing afterwords! As expected!

Now then, well, I think everyone probably has an inkling of what topic I’m going to discuss. It’s none other than Roshidere Anime Adaptation, which is set to premiere in April 2024. Oh, by the way, the editor told me, “According to the custom in the light novel industry, the latest volume should be released to coincide with the start of the anime broadcast, so if we follow that, Volume 8 would be released in April.”

But... I didn’t want to keep readers waiting unnecessarily for two months, so I decided on my own to just release Volume 8 in February as usual. Hehe, how about that? Aren’t I a novelist who thinks of my readers? Well, I say that, but honestly, it’s because I myself would be troubled if there was suddenly a two-month gap (to be omitted). Well,

my mental state is like shape-memory alloy, so even if I get down, I'll bounce back after a night's sleep.

Hmm, it seems like I've gone off on a tangent, but let's get back to the topic of afterword material. The first thing is... about Anime Festival Asia held in Singapore, abbreviated as AFA! I was invited as the author of Roshidere to the stage event at AFA held in late November! Hahaha, I've heard stories about famous authors staying at hot spring inns on their publishers' dime, locked away writing their novels~ but never did I imagine I would be sent overseas on a business trip at the publisher's expense. Actually, it seems quite rare even at KADOKAWA for such events to be held before the anime broadcast, but it's greatly appreciated

that they're putting so much effort into promoting it. Reflecting on that gratitude, I embarked on my first trip overseas... yes, my first trip overseas. I even got my passport for this. When I mentioned this, one of the KADOKAWA staff who accompanied me said, "Huh! You've written Roshidere without even going abroad!?" without any malice, just shock... Well, even if I say that, authors who write fantasy novels haven't (probably) been to other worlds either (to be omitted). So even though I've never been abroad, there's nothing strange about me writing Roshidere! That's right, I'm a total indoor person. Basically, I don't want to go out on my days off. If I'm not at home, then it's not a day off for me. That's how it is for me. Because of this disposition, I had no interest in domestic travel, let alone overseas travel, but my trip to Singapore this time was insanely fun. Despite not being able to speak English at all (I basically only said yes, no, thank you, okay, and I see), thanks to the perfect guidance from the KADOKAWA staff, it was incredibly comfortable. Among the members of the business trip, I only knew the editor in charge and the anime producer beforehand, but the staff in the promotion department were also very friendly and kind... as expected, people in the promotion department must be professionally sociable.

And Sumire Uesaka-san, her hair stylist, and her manager were also very friendly and easy to talk to.

The Radiant Sun: Desire and Intrigue at the Casino[1] Arc, Complete!!

With all that said and done, I've truly had a variety of valuable experiences. Once again, thank you to everyone involved. If the anime becomes a hit, please take me to Las Vegas next time. So that I see a real bunny girl! My adventure never ends—(I'll stop here).

Now, onto the second topic, which is about dubbing! It's about the recording session for the first episode of the Roshidere anime! You know, the one often introduced in the bonus manga in the afterword of comic tankobon. Well, it seems it will also be depicted in the fourth volume of the Roshidere manga adaptation. Since that one will have illustrations by Temanamachi-sensei, please check it out if you're interested! Alright, advertising quota fulfilled, even though no one asked for it this time.

So, I thought I'd share some parts that Temanamachi-sensei couldn't cover in the reportage manga[2]... but then I received the

storyboard for it, and it's surprisingly detailed, but there's no part for me to write, and Temanamachi-sensei's humanoid avatar is seriously creepy. Um, what should I do? Hmm～... Oh, right. At this recording session, I finally met Momoco-sensei for the first time! Until now, we'd only exchanged messages, and I'd sent her a DM for the first greeting, but finally, in the third year of serialization, I got to meet her in person.

It was moving. Oh, and it was the second time for Temanamachi-sensei.

We'd met once before for a face-to-face meeting before the serialization of the comic adaptation started. We're the same age, and since Temanamachi-sensei is sociable, by the second time we met up, we were already acting like friends.

With all that said, the dubbing finally began, and... wow, professional voice actors are truly amazing. Well, I think anyone could say that, and it's also depicted well in Temanamachi-sensei's reportage manga, so I won't say anything about the main characters' recording.

Instead, what I want to talk about is the voice acting for the background characters! You know, the chatter in the classroom or cafeteria with a crowd of people talking! That's amazing! Did you know? They're not just adding random background voices; the voice actors are actually doing ad-libbed conversations on the spot. And they're probably just conversing with the two or three people next to them by chance.

Furthermore, they recorded three patterns: one with a mix of men and women, one with women mainly in front of the mic, and one with men mainly in front of the mic. It's truly incredible how the voice actors can improvise and speak all those lines on the spot when told to

do so.

Personally, I'm confident that if I were suddenly asked to do it, I'd only be able to say, "The weather's nice, isn't it?" Unfortunately, unlike Prince Shōtoku[3] or Masachika, I can't distinguish between ten conversations happening simultaneously, so I couldn't tell who was saying which line... but anyway, the cafeteria conversation was so funny, it was like a comedy sketch. I can't go into detail about the content because it would be a spoiler, but if you're interested, try listening closely. It was truly a masterpiece.

And so, we finished recording for the main characters and also for the background characters, ending Part A. At this point, it was about two hours. We had been told in advance that the recording session would take about four to five hours, so I thought we might finish a bit early, and indeed, Part B ended in about an hour and a half... or so I

thought. From there, we had an extra part, recording lines in Russian!

With supervision from a Russian teacher, we recorded lines word by word, and let me tell you, it was quite challenging. You see, up until then, we had received directions from the anime director, the sound director (and me), like "Be more friendly here," or "Make it a bit brighter," or "Huh? Is it 'Nikk(e)ru' or 'Nikker(u)?'" on top of acting and pronunciation guidance. Now, we had to add Russian pronunciation guidance on top of that. Even if the pronunciation in Russian was correct, if it didn't match the image in terms of acting, we had to do it again. On top of that, the anime production side had already prepared the footage roughly estimating how much time it would take once it was in Russian. So, we had to figure out, "Huh!? If we change it to Russian, it's longer than expected!? Can we extend this scene a bit?" In the midst of all that, I found myself shrinking, thinking, "I'm sorry... because I casually added a lot of Russian lines, I've caused trouble for everyone..."

Then, I thought, "This extra part is going to take a while...!" But, as expected, the professional voice actors are amazing. Sumire Uesaka-san, who can speak Russian naturally, of course, but also the others must have practiced many times beforehand. It wasn't uncommon to get it right on the first try, and this part ended in about thirty minutes.

However, all in all, it took four hours. I didn't expect it to take this long for just one episode, so I was surprised. I truly felt that it was a very tough job. As we were leaving, Kōhei Amazaki-san, who plays Masachika, kindly called out to me, "In terms of playing Masachika,

am I doing it alright~?" He was really humble and a nice guy. No, he was wonderful. As I'm writing this afterword, we've finished recording two episodes already, and not just Kōhei Amazaki-san, but all the voice actors' performances were fantastic. Even though the animation is still in progress, the beauty of the animation is already evident, and I'm really looking forward to the final product. So, I believe the Roshidere anime will definitely be a great work, so please be sure to watch it, everyone! Alright, the unsolicited second round of advertising is done!!

And, as I was saying... before I knew it, I had already filled nine pages with this afterword. Hah, I'm such a hypocrite. It's because there was so little feedback, I ended up overdoing it. Now, I have to cut the acknowledgements. Hmm, okay, I managed to save a little over one page by trimming the beginning in three places. It feels like I was a bit rough with the trimming, but oh well. The uncut, complete version including

the trimmed parts won't be published anywhere. Now, let's move on to the acknowledgments.

Once again, I'm sorry for the sluggish progress and causing inconvenience during the year-end and New Year's, Miyagawa-sama (the editor.) Thank you so much for your support, even during the Singapore trip and the dubbing sessions. Next, to Momoco-sensei, who always creates wonderful illustrations. I'm sorry for ordering illustrations at the busy year-end. In addition to the numerous wonderful illustrations in this volume, the cover of the art book is also refreshing... Ah! I forgot to mention the art book! The first art book for Roshidere is scheduled to be released in July 2024, along with Volume 9

of the original work. Please look forward to it, everyone! It will include exclusive illustrations, so be sure to check it out! Oops, I'm running out of space. Next, to Temanamachi-sensei, who diligently and meticulously creates high-quality manga adaptations every time. We've finally entered the content of Volume 2 of the original work from the beginning of the year. I'm looking forward to the appearances of Ayano, Sayaka, and Nonoa! Lastly, to Suzuki-san, the editor in charge of the manga adaptation, Iwata-san, the editor in charge of the art book, the promotion department, the animation studio, the cast, and everyone else involved in the production of Roshidere, and to all the readers who have been reading Roshidere, I express my gratitude that cannot be contained even by a jack-o'-lantern. Thank you very much! Please continue to support us in 2024!

Let’s meet again in the afterword of the art book, okay!

[1]: Singapore is known for its casino resorts.

[2]: “Report manga” (レポート漫画) refers to a type of manga where the manga artist themselves conduct research and introduce real people, events, experiences, and so on. It’s also referred to as “information manga” or “reportage manga.”

[3]: A renowned Japanese prince who served as a regent, a pro tempore ruler for when a current monarch is unavailable or unable to govern (think the President pro tempore of the Senate for when the Vice-President isn't present isn't present in a session for example), and politician.

Fan Translator's Note

Yooo. Thanks for reading our fan-TL of Roshidere Volume 8! We all hope that you enjoyed it as much as we did. Feel free to take the time to rate the series on Novel Updates if you did!

I'd like to express my gratitude to Ikea, Darrk, and the lolicon Sabre!

Fan-translating this volume wouldn't have gone as smoothly without their contributions in editing and proofreading. They were big help (maybe except the part where they kept slandering me for being gay on the daily.) (It's true tho

- Darrk)

w

Anyways, what a volume, huh? It had a nice balance of drama, comedy, and we even got some insight into Masachika's past. Some of you may be disappointed that there was no confession, but please understand that it's only the 8th volume. (Only is insane

- Ikea)

£

I'll catch you all in Volume 9, and probably cope with yall when the anime adaptation inevitably turns out to be mid, like they all do :(

Feel free to join our discord server for updates or to participate in brain rot chill with us! We also fan-translate other series which we upload to our website as well!

As always, please support the author by buying the official translation when they catch up! Please do not reupload nor resell our fan-TLs. Our operation is just a hobby for us, and is strictly non-profit.

- NaCl

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